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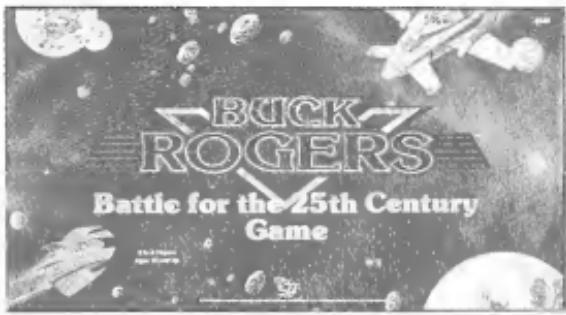
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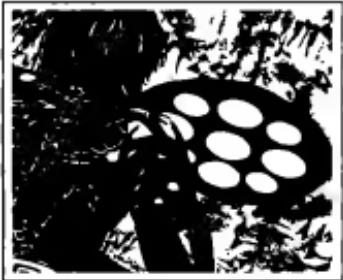
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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

The man we honor this month is a good-natured, soft-spoken, 78-year-old Pennsylvanian — Pennsylvania Dutch, as a matter of fact — who happens to be one of the most significant figures in the history of American science-fiction publishing. "Lloyd who?" you are apt to ask. In truth his name is no longer one to conjure with, these days. But anyone whose roots in the SF world go back a generation or so could tell you something about Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's real importance — and would probably speak of him with genuine affection as well.

What this quiet, profoundly likable man did — one of his many achievements in our field — was to set in motion the whole business of publishing science fiction in hard covers. His Fantasy Press, founded in 1946, rescued from pulp-magazine obscurity the classic SF masterpieces of E. E. "Doc" Smith, Jack Williamson, A. E. van Vogt, Stanley G. Weinbaum, L. Sprague de Camp, John W. Campbell, Jr., and many another grand pioneer. By the time his undercapitalized and understaffed publishing company finally went under in the 1950s — pushed aside by the competition of the major New York publishers, belatedly following the trail Eshbach had blazed — it had produced some fifty beautifully bound volumes, which today are sought-after collector's items.

(Eshbach, as he reads this, will probably already have corrected me twice. "Pennsylvania Dutch," he will point out, is a misnomer, a corruption

of *Deutsch* — for the Pennsylvania "Dutch" are, in fact, of German stock. Yes, Lloyd, I know that. But, as you are weary aware, "Pennsylvania Dutch" is what the rest of us incorrigibly call the settlers of the county to which your ancestors came from the Rhineland in 1734.

(The other point with which Eshbach will take issue is my calling him the father of SF book publishing. August Derleth's Arkham House, he will say, published its first book in 1939. And Don Grant, Tom Hadley, and Ken Krueger were bringing out hardcover editions of novels by John Taine and "Doc" Smith a full year before Fantasy Press was born. Right you are, Lloyd. But Arkham House's specialty was horror and fantasy — Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, William Hope Hodgson, and only the most occasional SF title — while the various Grant-Hadley-Krueger companies of 1946 were ephemeral entities that issued only a handful of titles. Your own Fantasy Press endured for a decade, the first of the specialist SF publishing companies to survive more than a matter of months, and produced a long and distinguished list of great books.)

The story of Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's lifelong involvement with fantasy and science fiction begins when he was nine or ten years old — somewhere about the year 1920 — when he stumbled on his older brothers' copies of the legendary Frank Munsey fiction magazines, *Argosy* and

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All-Story. Here was a treasure trove of astounding stories: Edgar Rice Burroughs' *The Gods of Mars*, A. Merritt's *The Moon Pool* and *Conquest of the Moon Pool*, and dozens more. From there it was on to *Weird Tales*, the first all-fantasy magazine, which began publication in 1923. And then, when he was fifteen and had just quit high school to take a job in a sign-writing shop, came a thrill that he still remembered keenly nearly sixty years later.

It was the spring of 1926. "I had stopped to look into the window of Kinkaid's Book Store," he wrote in his 1983 autobiography, *Over My Shoulder*. "The back wall of the window was covered with magazines. And there it was — a picture of the planet Saturn and above it a comet-tail title, *Amazing Stories*! I had money in my pocket — after all, I was now a working man — and in moments I was the delighted owner of the first issue of the world's first science-fiction magazine."

For Eshbach, the new *Amazing Stories* was the gateway not only to wondrous reading but to an unexpected literary career. He had written a few short stories for his high-school magazine; and now, turning the huge close-printed pages of *Amazing*, he was swept with the desire, so familiar to many of us, to create the very kind of fiction that was providing him with such intense pleasure.

When he was seventeen his first story, "Up from the Pit" — an imitation of the feverish, adjective-heavy work of his favorite, A. Merritt — went off to Hugo Gernsback, *Amazing*'s editor. Back it came with a printed rejection slip. Back came the second story, too, and a third, though that time he received an encouraging note and some suggestions for revision. Then he sent a fourth, "A Voice from the Ether," to *Amazing*, and a

fifth, "The Man With the Silver Disc," to *Science Wonder Stories*, a new magazine that Gernsback had started after financial difficulties forced him to lose control of his original publishing company.

There was a long silence from both magazines.

Then, Eshbach tells us, "came that never-to-be-forgotten day, October 14, 1929. I was working at Sears as a card writer and window decorator, a little more than two blocks from my home. I walked home for lunch, but no lunch was eaten that day. When I entered the house, my mother handed me an envelope from the publishers of *Amazing Stories*. I tore it open.

"They had accepted 'A Voice from the Ether!'"

But there was more, he relates. In those far-off days there were two home mail deliveries a day — and the afternoon mail brought a second acceptance from *Science Wonder Stories* for "The Man With the Silver Disc."

His writing career was doubly launched in a single day. The following spring came a check for \$40 from Gernsback, and, eventually, an equally modest check from *Amazing* for "A Voice from the Ether." Over the next few years — writing always as a part-time hobby — Eshbach sold an assortment of other stories, ultimately 49 in all to 30 different magazines. Meanwhile he had drifted into the world of science-fiction fandom, which had sprung up around the young SF magazines of the time, and quickly became involved in the amateur and semi-pro publishing enterprises that would lead, one day, to some major professional careers.

Though his stories were vivid and imaginative, and well liked by readers, Eshbach quite rightly has never thought of himself as one of the great SF writers. Writing fiction was hardly

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ever anything more than a hobby for him, and he himself calls the totality of his output "less than sensational." It was in his role as founder of Fantasy Press — and as godfather to half a dozen other small-publishing ventures of the era, to which he offered advice, printing assistance, and other aid, even though they were in fact his competitors — that he earned his place in science-fiction history. His shrewdness, his wisdom, above all his calm, level-headed approach to the difficulties of shoestring publishing made him a unique figure in that frantic period when the mighty science-fiction enterprise was getting off to its wobbly start.

Since the decline of Fantasy Press, Eshbach has been involved only in the most minor way in the publishing of science fiction, though his familiar presence is often visible at East Coast SF gatherings. Genial, sociable, infinitely knowledgeable about the fiction we all cherish, he remains one of the pillars of the science-fiction family he helped to create.

And now, rather surprisingly, he has returned to his first love — writing. 1983 saw the publication of *Subspace Explorers*, a novel left unfinished by E. E. Smith at his death in 1965 — and now completed by his old friend, Lloyd Eshbach. The following year came *The Land Beyond the Gate*, a colorful fantasy adventure, announced as the first of a four-volume series. And, so I understand it, there are other projects to follow.

Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's importance in the field was recognized forty years ago, when he was named Guest of Honor at the Seventh World Science Fiction Convention in Cincinnati. That distinction, perhaps the highest the SF world confers, came to him before it had been awarded to such

great figures as Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, and even the grand progenitor of us all, Hugo Gernsback. Now we honor him again, for his durability, his perseverance, and above all for his great achievement of demonstrating what once seemed to be impossible, that science fiction could be published in hardcover form and win an eager and steady audience. •

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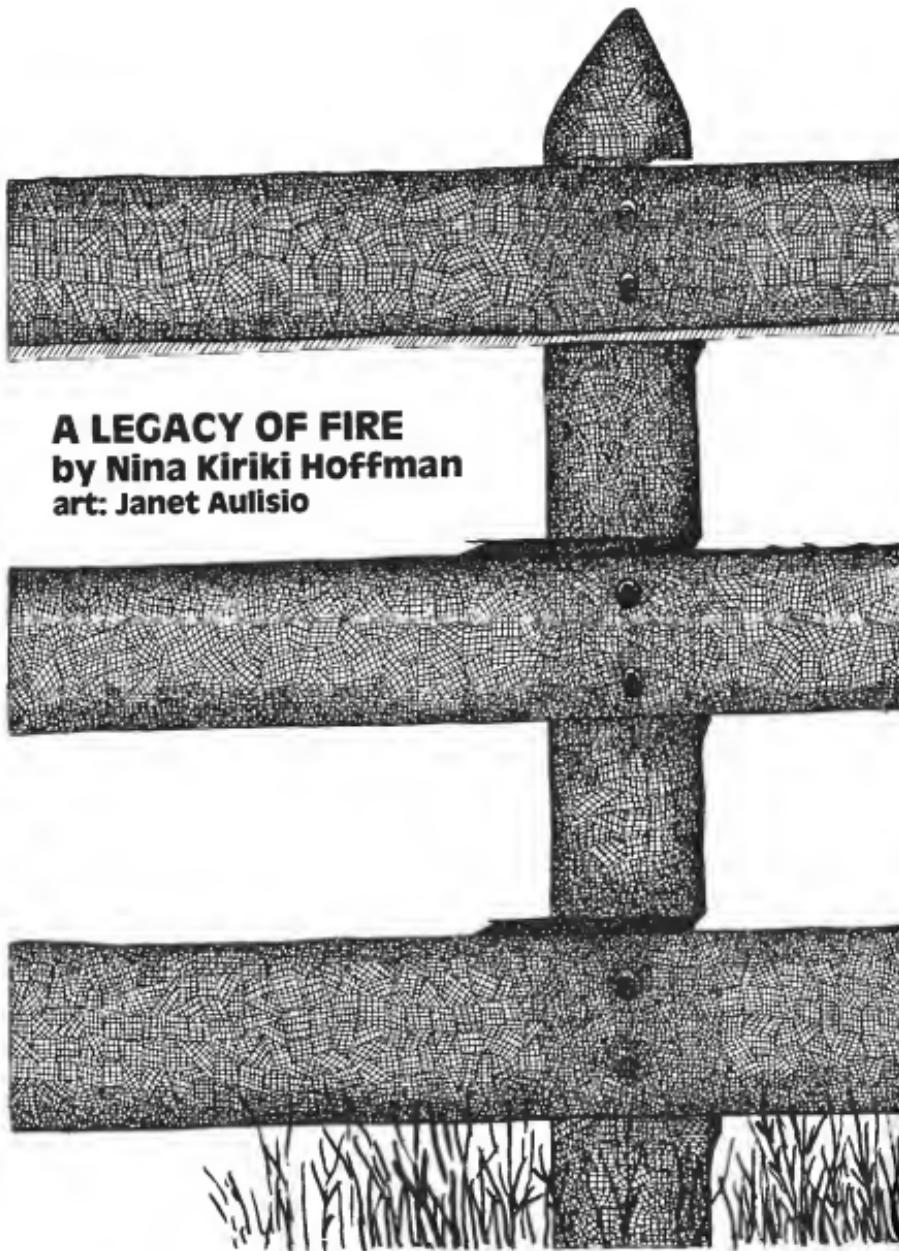
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A LEGACY OF FIRE
by **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**
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The author grew up in Southern California and has been writing since the age of twelve. When, as a child, she couldn't find enough books to read, she figured out how to make up her own stories. She is now a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop (1982) and a member of the Pulphouse Writers' Workshop in Eugene, Oregon.

Her short stories have appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Writers of the Future, vol. 1, Tales by Moonlight (edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson), and Clarion Awards (edited by Damon Knight). This is her first story sale to Amazing® Stories.

I was leaning on the second rail of our three-rail gate the morning I first saw the blue coupe. The second rail is as high as I can lean; though twenty-four, I am not man-size, nor ever will be.

The coupe was a color I had not seen in nature: turquoise, a strange color to see on our roads, for almost everything in Civility is a uniform dust color — if not at first, soon after its arrival.

The car went wallowing by, throwing up a spray of moon-gray road dust. My nephew Chip had a consuming interest in cars, and he was under the impression that I shared it; I peered through the haze of dust, trying to collect another brand name and model for Chip's list of spotted-near-Civility cars.

At first I thought I had missed my chance, but the car stopped a little way up the road, shifted gears, and backed up. It was a Pontiac Phoenix. The passenger door opened, and a man leaned over. He was wearing a pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled above the elbows, a loosened tie, and a pair of charcoal slacks. "Can I give you a lift, son?" he asked, then smiled, lifting one eyebrow and producing a comma-shaped dimple in his right cheek. He had a crop of disordered dark brown hair, and thick dark brows above eyes of a disconcerting warm hazel color.

"Where are you going?" I asked, watching for the change in expression that should come when he heard my voice and realized I was not the boy I seemed.

"Downtown Civility," he said, without reacting visibly.

"All right." My sister Polly wouldn't need me to babysit Rosalie until the afternoon, and I had finished all my morning chores. I knew for a fact Cousin Page had taken the pickup into town. He would spend lunchtime at the Grassroots Café because Elaine Neiswander would be there waitressing, so I was guaranteed a ride home. I leaned and stepped between the bottom and second rails of the gate, walked down the pebbly incline of driveway that spanned the weedy roadside ditch, and climbed into the turquoise car. It had fire-red upholstery and smelled of plastic piping and processed air. The

seat's padding was thick and comfortable. I closed the door and looked up at the driver.

"Kelly Emerson," he said, holding out his hand.

"Henry Vleming," I said, shaking hands.

"Lived here long?" He turned and shifted gears, setting the car in motion.

"All my life." I studied the dashboard, trying to catalog it in my mind so I could give Chip a full report.

"Is there anyone around here who takes in boarders? I'd like to do some field work here."

"What line of business you in, Mr. Emerson?"

"I study things. Right now I'm working on a paper on social interactions in rural communities. Civility struck me as just the right size."

"Well, now . . . Mrs. Tripp, our school teacher, sometimes takes lodgers during the hunting season."

"Does she live in town?"

"Yes — next door to Taylor's General Store. I'll direct you." Not that he could lose his way, on all two blocks of Main Street and the scrabble of buildings at either end. I wondered what he had been doing out near our farm, eight miles of raggedy road from town, and on the way to nowhere. His car was cool and quiet and comfortable enough that I enjoyed the ride, though I was too short to see much landscape out the windows. Maybe he just liked driving around.

I leaned on the armrest and peered toward the back seat. It was piled high with a miscellany of objects: shiny-hinged black cases shaped to hold anything from pool cues to rifles to musical instruments; also, things in various brown paper bags with the tops twisted shut: a very odd collection of luggage.

"Do you use any of that — equipment in your research?" I asked.

"All of it." His dimple reappeared.

"You must be a traveling magician, Mr. Emerson."

"Of sorts. Would you like to assist me, Mr. Vleming?"

"I believe I would," I said. A strange sensation of delight stole over me. It had been such a long time since I had had a conversation on this order with an adult — not since I graduated from high school. Though I saw Patricia Tripp in town occasionally, I didn't talk to her. She would want to ask me how my writing was going, and I disliked telling her it wasn't. I had gotten bogged down too often in lunatic raving against fate for placing me in such a body; on re-reading my notebook, I decided that all that adolescent fury and resentment got me nowhere, so I tucked it behind my dresser and left my pens to gather dust. Better to plod through life, letting the animating spark die down a bit, and wait for the new children to be born. In addition to feeding the cats and dogs and chickens on the farm, I took care of the babies until they outgrew me, and there was companionship in that, though not much elevated conversation.

I had the feeling that if I worked with Emerson, a man who bothered to paint his car this startling and improbable color, something might happen. Something might change.

Emerson parked in front of Taylor's General Store.

The store porch was three steps up, so I could see it through the windshield without effort. Emerson reached for his door handle, but I waited; Darcy Lenox, who lived on the bench by the store entrance, had company, and I didn't want to be there for the visit. Emerson glanced at me, then settled back to wait.

The boy standing above Darcy was about Chip's age, eleven, and owned a slender build and a thatch of red hair that led me to suspect he was one of the McCrearies; in my experience, they were meaner than most because they stayed small until they reached about seventeen, and it scared them. Emerson cracked his window; we heard a few words, though from watching Darcy one would never guess what the boy was saying, for Darcy kept his face perfectly still, its narrow smile not shifting at all. Emerson closed his window again.

The boy went inside the store. I looked at my hands. I wondered how big a grenade might be, then chased that thought off; I hadn't had one like it in an age, and I had believed myself cured of them. I looked at Emerson, who lifted an eyebrow; I nodded and we got out of the car. Social interaction, I thought, and wondered what he made of that one.

Darcy sat on the spot he had worn on the bench and watched us as if wondering what face to wear. Unlike myself (I am essentially correct in proportion, though small), Darcy was a misshapen dwarf: his head was overlarge, and his arms were short. He had lived in and around Taylor's for most of his fifty-seven years. Once he took the train to a city, thinking there would be some place where a person could be respected regardless of size; but he found other places worse by comparison and came back to Civility, where at least he had food and shelter, though at the expense of his dignity. Taylor took care of him because people came to the store to tease him. I knew I was well off, having a family who cared for me; they had coped with Great-uncle Isaac for seventy-two years, which gave them plenty of practice.

"Darcy, this is Mr. Emerson," I said, hoping an introduction would lead Darcy to behave like a person who possessed a brain. "Mr. Emerson, this is Mr. Lenox."

Emerson held out his hand. Darcy frowned a moment, then held out his. He was sensitive about his hands, which were small and stubby. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lenox," said Emerson, shaking hands.

"Likewise," said Darcy. He glanced at me.

"We're going to Mrs. Tripp's," I said. "He's thinking of staying."

"Indeed," said Darcy. His smile was tight. "Well. Welcome to Civility, Mr. Emerson."

"Thank you."

"This way," I said, leading Emerson to the left. I ran my fingers through my hair, dislodging bits of dried grass, and slapped the dust out of my overalls as I walked. I owed Mrs. Tripp respect. I remembered when I used to wash till the blood tingled under my skin before going to catch the school bus. Mrs. Tripp had been the most important thing in my life in those days.

Her house was set back from the street, behind a sidewalk, a dusty white picket fence, and then a rather weedy front yard with a big shadow-hatching tree in it. The house loomed tall, slate gray, with white trim and edges of roof sticking out — coattail Victorian. It had a spacious front porch. The yard spread from the flanks of the house outward, enforcing distance between it and its neighbors. Young trees grew in haphazard groupings along the sides of the house, maples with their dusty late spring wealth of leaves.

I opened the gate and preceded Emerson up the cracked cement walk and onto the porch. He rang the bell.

The inner door opened, and there she stood, her lines blurred by the lace-work of the screen door. She was wearing a dark green turtleneck blouse, and jeans. Her black eyes looked as large and vivid as always, and her black hair, close-cropped and wavy, showed no signs of silver yet. "Henry. How nice," she said, her voice full of amber warmth, and I felt a rush of desire as intense as any I had ever experienced in high school.

I lapsed immediately into commonplace. "Mrs. Tripp, this is Mr. Emerson."

"Mr. Vleming tells me you sometimes rent rooms, Mrs. Tripp," said Emerson.

She paused, her palm flat on the screen, and looked at him. Then she unlatched the screen door. "Won't you come in? Henry, you've graduated. Please call me Pat. Can you reintroduce us?" She held the door open.

I looked at her bare feet. Long, pale, and slender, the tendons taut as though ready to pounce. "Kelly, this is Pat. Pat, this is Kelly," I said, and looked up. It was the first time I had said her nickname aloud. It had the power of a trumpet blast: somewhere inside me, a wall came down, leaving me closer to her, as if she had asked me to dream about her. In the past I had dreamed, without permission.

Emerson held out his hand for the third time since I met him. She shook it, her expression grave. Then she looked up and light touched her eyes.

Most of the furnishings in the living room were done in that dark blue one commonly associates with three-ring binders. The coffee table was polished wood with areas of deep red grain, and the blue-and-white Chinese rug lightened the room. A smell of pine incense clung to the furniture. We had nothing like this at the farm. Tiny butter-ivory figurines stood on a high shelf, beside glass paperweights with colored explosions inside. A scarlet enameled vase with a pattern of cloisonné chrysanthemums had its own short wooden stand under a table lamp.

"Please sit down," said Mrs. Tripp. Pat. She went to an overstuffed arm-chair with a floor lamp leaning over it. Emerson and I sat on the couch. Its blue velvet bore evidence of cat hair, so I felt less out of place.

"How long would you want to stay?" she said to Emerson. Her hands grasped each other in her lap.

"Perhaps a month. I intend to do some research here, and Henry" — he looked at me to see if he had permission to use my Christian name; I nodded — "has agreed to assist me."

"What sort of research?" she asked, and he rattled off his answer. By this time I suspected he was up to something completely different, and I wanted to find out what.

"It sounds interesting," she said. "I'd like you to stay." She put her hands on her knees. "I'd like to see you shake Henry out of his stupor," she said, and looked at me. "He's been vegetating out there on the farm too long. And speaking of social interaction, there's a dance tomorrow night. I'd like to invite you both."

I hugged my surprise to me while they discussed room rates. That was how I introduced Emerson to Civility, like a spark is introduced to kindling.

When I went to find Cousin Page at the café, Elaine gave me a green lollipop. I couldn't tell whether she was being nice or cruel; I put the candy in a front pocket to give to Chip. Page, the least musical person in my nearly immediate family, sang the whole way home, which suited me very well, despite his inability to find a key and stay with it. I did not want to start jousting with rumors yet.

Nobody asked me anything until we were preparing supper at the small house. "Hear Mrs. Tripp got a new boarder," my sister Polly said as she handed me a bowl of boiled potatoes to mash and a cup of milk to smooth them with. I could hear her husband Fletcher practicing jigs and reels on his fiddle in the next room.

"Oh?" I said to Polly. I put my shoulders into mashing, breathing potato steam, a thick white smell.

"Don't obfuscate," said Polly. "Edie said you came to town with him." Edie ran the Magic Wand, a beauty parlor across the street from Taylor's. "What do you think? Is Mrs. Tripp safe? Is it marriage?"

"I think she's safe," I said, then wondered. People talked every time Patricia Tripp took in boarders — scandalous behavior. Despite the talk, she took in boarders every year, and nothing seemed to come of it except a lot of ugly rumors and speculations about what sort of morals she might be teaching the children. Evidence indicated she taught the children to read and write and cipher, so the school board took no action. The Taylors, who lived above their store next door, watched all Pat's windows on their side of her house, and Mrs. Taylor sometimes made up stories, but they didn't convince the townswomen because they all read the same books and knew

where she was stealing her plots from.

Polly prodded me with one end of her rolling pin. "Who is the man, Henry? What does he want?"

"He just wants to ask people questions," I said, having a sudden image of Emerson and me knocking on doors, clipboards in our hands and pens poised. There was something savory about such a picture, if I didn't pay attention to how ridiculous I looked. There was a purpose to it. I hadn't had a purpose since high school, when I planned to set the world afire writing.

"Questions?" said Polly. She frowned.

"What can it hurt?" I said. I had been asking questions most of my life — maybe not aloud — and nothing ever changed.

Polly gave me the look of a woman who has taken a bite of a sour apple. I have wondered ever since what was going through her mind at that moment. Did she realize the right questions could act as levers big enough to move the world?

After supper, I went up to the main house to talk to Great-uncle Isaac. He spent most of his time in his room, a little place under the roof where anybody but us would have bumped their heads. As usual, he was carving something — a bear this time — and smoking Half & Half tobacco in a corncob pipe. "Hey, Henry! When you going to give up messing in the affairs of big people and settle down?" he yelled as he always did.

"Hey, Isaac. When you coming out of your hole?" I asked, as I always did, going in to sit on the bed. The floor around his chair was covered with a mesh of slivers, and the clean wood scent mixed with the pipe smoke.

"You found anything out there worth seeing yet?" He set his half-carved bear and his knife on the table beside him, with other partially shaped odds and ends of wood.

I told him about Emerson. "He's picking me up tomorrow morning after chores. He wants me to help him."

"I don't know, Henry; sounds like just another person who's figured out a way to use you."

"But it feels like friendship."

"Oh, Henry." He stood up, came over, and touched my head. "Don't let him lay a finger on your heart. Chances are he's just got good manners, and you don't meet enough like that around here to know the difference."

"I want you to meet him, Isaac."

"All right."

The night before had been cool and wet, so the dew still lay on the land, raising a riot of fresh grass smell as it evaporated. Hills sloped away in the clear morning air, looking as green as if dust had never been invented. Down at the base of the hill the turquoise car waited with both front doors open.

"Quite a taste in colors this fellow has," said Isaac.

Emerson was stretched out on his seat with his face to the sun and his eyes closed.

"Kelly?" I said.

"Ah, Henry, doesn't a morning like this make you feel as if you'd been rebuilt from the inside out?" he said without opening his eyes.

"Like you could plant a seed and watch it grow?"

"Hear it grow." His smile deepened. He squinted, turned his face to us, and opened his eyes. "Oh, hello."

"Kelly, this is my Great-uncle Isaac."

"Would that be Mr. Vleming, sir?" Emerson asked.

Isaac took his pipe out of his mouth. "Tallstack. One of life's little ironies. Are you always this soft-spoken, or is this a deference you pay to my great age or small size?"

Emerson looked at him a moment. "I am a weather vane, sir; I change with the prevailing winds."

"Good answer. Watch the man operate, Henry, and see what you can pick up. Even if he never tells you another truth, that one may have been worth it. Good day to you, sir." He put his pipe back in his mouth and trudged up the hill toward the scatter of buildings.

Emerson watched him all the way up. "Does he suspect me of something?" he asked at last as I climbed into the car.

"He suspects everybody of something. That, in case you missed the point, was a positive review."

"Are you suspicious of everyone, too?"

"Aren't you?"

He looked at me for a while before reaching to close the door. "No," he said. "Stop me if this disturbs you, Henry. But I've been wondering about this since I met you. People always accept me at face value, partly because I'm an excellent chameleon." He glanced at me. "I have never run across a social situation I couldn't handle. I don't have to be suspicious of people. I know they'll like me; I know it in my very bones. Usually, they'll do what I want, if I'm careful not to want something beyond their capability to give." He turned the full force of his gaze on me; the green in his eyes seemed as clear as the morning hills. "What must it be like to be you?"

"An explanation being within my capacity to give?" I said. My door was still open, and I could still climb out.

"I've never said that out loud before. I do a lot of traveling and meet a lot of people, but I don't usually ask this kind of question. Did I go too far?"

I studied his profile, wondering if this was true or a display of chameleomics. "Kelly." I looked at my child's hands, flat against the red upholstery. "Your interest is a gift to me, but I can't help looking in the teeth of this gift. I've run into booby-trapped presents before. Information is one of the few things I own. I would love to talk to you about myself, but I can't help won-

dering what you will do with this information. Why are you here? Are you researching a book on freaks? What do you want?"

"First, I want to understand you. Then I want to give you a gift."

"Why?"

"Because that's what I do. Not for a book, not for a paper; just for me." He looked at me again. No smile, no revulsion; just a waiting look. If he were lying, he did it well.

"All right," I said, but felt as if I had breathed in when I should have breathed out. I pulled my door shut, and with that quiet, oiled closure, all my unease vanished. I thought instead of how to frame my explanations of myself.

"It's not just that nothing fits — furniture, vehicles, adult clothes; the cupboards are too high, and so are some doorknobs. Children experience that, but they know they will grow into the world, and that's a comfort I don't have." I sat nearly buried in the deep sagging cushions of a musty armchair in Emerson's room. He sat on the carpet, leaning his back against the quilt-covered bed, and looked up at me, which was a novelty. A pitcher full of deep-purple lilacs stood on the bedside table, scenting the air with late spring. Sun sifted into the room through white net curtains, and the high ceiling and white walls gave a feeling of space, enhanced by the enormous oval mirror above the bird's-eye maple dresser. The top of the mirror tilted out. I could see myself in my chair across the room. The fuzzy, petticoat-strained light gilded my hair and erased the character in my face, leaving me looking like a boy.

Emerson sat in shadow. In the mirror, the back of his head looked black.

"One becomes accustomed to the physical aspects of one's size, though every now and then, something strikes new pain. That's why it's safer to stay in the same place. There are fewer unpleasant surprises. People know you. You don't seem so strange to them after a while. Even the teasing becomes familiar; when you know what to expect, it doesn't hurt so much. Nothing hurts as much as surprise."

"But what feels good?"

I stopped for a moment, confused by the break in thought. "Holding a baby feels good, knowing you can cart all that future person around in your arms. Most of the rest of it is just comfortable, not really good. Wait. Talking to you feels good."

"Surprise."

I looked at him carefully. He wasn't smiling. "Yes," I said at last. "Nothing hurts like surprise. And nothing delights like surprise. The rest is covered by a layer of dust. I was going to tell you what the worst thing is, Kelly. The worst thing is not what people think and say about me, though when someone tells me what someone else has said, that cuts me, with the strength of surprise. The worst thing of all is what I imagine people saying and think-

ing about me. That cripples me in the privacy of my own head, where I live."

"That covers you in a layer of dust."

"Yes," I said. I could feel my heart beating. "Yes."

"Henry. What do you want most in life?"

I felt as if lightning jolted through me. I could not speak. For an instant all the dreams I had cherished flickered through my mind. The great writer, photographed from the neck up, his deformity concealed, his books on the racks of every bus station and supermarket — beloved and unknown. The secret pituitary gland operation that restored normal secretion so I regained my youth and gained new height. A will leaving me a million dollars so I could build a house and furniture and have clothes sewn specially for me. A spaceship that would take me away to a planet where everyone else was my size. All the withered leaves of adolescent dreams; I thought I had abandoned them.

"A reason to be here at all," I said.

He looked down at the braided rag rug he sat on, then up at me. "My theory is, we're here to learn something. You make a choice, and you learn from it. Every time you choose, instead of waiting for the choice to be made for you, you gain power in the world."

"What choice do I have? There aren't a lot of openings for midget labor."

"You chose to get into my car," he said. I thought of the power that had given me, to step out of my ordinary life and into an alien environment, where I was treated as if I were a total person.

"Yes," I said.

"Before I leave, I'm going to invite you to make another choice. I still have a little studying to do. But expect the invitation to come."

Emerson dropped me off at home soon after that, and I told him not to bother picking me up for the dance that evening; I could just as well come to town with Fletcher and Polly and Chip. After supper I did the most thorough wash I had done in years, trimmed my hair, and wore my green Sunday shirt under my overalls. "What's got into you, Henry?" Polly asked. "You never come to these things."

"You're not going to dance, are you, Uncle Henry?" Chip asked me. His voice held an uneasy note I didn't understand until later.

"Probably not," I said.

"You can see everything from the choir loft," said Fletcher. He was wearing a plaid shirt, a pair of jeans, cowboy boots, and an odd expression. He carried his fiddle case.

"I expect I can," I said. I hadn't been in the community center, a converted church, in years. The town staged these dances once a month; Fletcher, my brothers Nick and Owen, and a couple of cousins played the music for them, and Chip and Polly usually went. Having removed myself from the

mainstream of community life since I got out of school, I naturally stayed home with the baby during the dances. But Mother was always willing to look after Rosalie, and I had taken the baby up to the main house immediately after supper.

Polly shook her head a little, but we all got in the Jeep and went. I told Chip about Emerson's car on the trip to town.

I got them to drop me off at Pat's house, where she and Emerson sat waiting on the porch. Pat wore her dead husband's blue velvet smoking jacket over a narrow silver-gray dress. She had black dancing slippers on her feet. Emerson had dressed just like Fletcher, in jeans and a plaid shirt; he looked surprisingly natural. I glanced through the gathering dusk toward Taylor's. Darcy had disappeared. I knew he had a small shed off the back where he slept.

"Hello," said Pat to me as I came up the path.

"Hello."

"Pat tells me you write," Emerson said. I climbed the porch steps.

"Wrote."

"Will you assist me tonight, Mr. Vleming?"

"I would be honored, Mr. Emerson," I said, feeling as if I had stepped into a Vaudeville sketch, and wishing I could live inside one.

He handed me a reporter's notebook and a pen. "Observations, Mr. Vleming. Would you observe social interactions tonight, so we can compare notes tomorrow? The local observer has a different perspective."

"I will do my best."

We walked together down the dark street, kicking up puffs of dust. Light and talk streamed out of the community center's open door, splashing onto the sidewalk and the street. Cars were still pulling into the parking lot, and that motion, too, raised temporary veils of dust, some drifting into the light before it settled. I heard the musicians tuning and wondered why I hadn't come to a dance before; I loved music and I rarely heard my relatives all play at the same time. Other people were walking up the street, calling to each other.

We went inside, stepping into a whirl of light, heat, sound, and height. Faced with a sea of knees and the hem of skirts, I glanced at the floor and wondered why I had come. My hands tightened around the notebook and pen Emerson had given me. Purpose. I remembered Fletcher mentioning the loft.

Chip reached out from somewhere and tugged on my overall strap. He pointed to the right. Emerson tapped my shoulder. I looked up at him; he and Pat had suddenly transformed into giants. I felt that nobody spoke the same language as I any longer. I held up my pen and notebook as though they were sword and shield. Emerson nodded, and I followed Chip to the stairs and up into the loft.

From where I leaned on the loft railing, I could see that no one else had

dressed like Pat. "Does she come often?" I asked Chip, who leaned on the railing beside me and looked down, brooding.

"Who, Mrs. Tripp? Never." He tugged on his lower lip. "I thought she didn't know how to have fun."

"All right, form squares," said a voice over the public-address system. On the raised platform at the head of the building where the altar used to be, my family stood poised to play, grins on their faces. But the dance caller was Mr. Jacob Taylor, whose voice made me think of beebee guns. There was not enough recoil on a beebee gun to hurt me.

As soon as the music started, I forgot him. I closed my eyes and listened to one of the tunes I had heard Fletcher practicing before supper, only with the addition of the guitar and the banjo and the other fiddles, the skeleton of a tune acquired flesh; a community of notes worked together toward a specific goal. I heard the synchronized shuffle and stamping of feet below, and smelled a mixture of humanity and perfume. When I noticed Mr. Taylor's voice again, it was a seamless part of the whole, directing things; it belonged there.

I looked down, on people transformed into a meshed machine. There were, however, a few loose cogs: Page and Elaine, off in a corner, his arm around her, and her head on his shoulder. And Pat, who didn't seem to know the figures like everyone else. Her dress was like a silver lining against their cloud of denim and colors, so she was easy to locate. She laughed and got lost, always rescued by someone. I couldn't sort Emerson out at all; he melted into the movement.

The music stopped, and so did the people, standing where they had been left, and clapping. I sat down to make a few notes.

"Half time," said Mr. Taylor over the p.a. "Darcy, you know the drill. You dance for us, and I'll give you an apple pie."

"What trained bear could ask for more?" said Darcy, his deep voice clear without the aid of a microphone. I stood up and looked over the railing. The dancers had cleared a space in the center of the floor for Darcy. He stood with his hands in his pockets and looked at them all, then glanced back over his shoulder and nodded to Fletcher, who struck up "The Sailors' Hornpipe."

Chip tensed beside me, covering his mouth with his hands. Darcy danced alone, watching his feet. And everyone laughed. His steps staggered, though he never lost track of the rhythm. Fletcher played faster. Darcy leapt from one foot to the other, punctuating his actions with kicks and shuffles, his hands in his pockets and his elbows out. Laughter came near to drowning out music. Chip started giggling. He looked at me and tried to cover his mouth again, his eyes full of remorse, but he couldn't help himself.

Everything inside me felt frozen. I waited, my knuckles white as I gripped my notebook and pen, until Darcy fell down, the music stopped, and everyone laughed and clapped. Mr. Taylor gave Darcy a pie and set him on a

speaker. Darcy ate with bare hands and teeth, tearing at the pie and swallowing without chewing. People patted him on the back. I wouldn't have; he looked ready to bite. His burning eyes met mine for a second. He grinned at me.

The music and the dance started again, and I sat down, with my back to the railing, looking at the upturned page of the notebook in my hand. It was still blank. Chip knelt. "I'm sorry, Uncle Henry. I'm so sorry. I just —"

"All right," I said, distracted. I waved a hand in the air, and he ran away.

I had trouble finding breath. I felt bruised all over. The music and the dance steps came pounding from below; I felt the beat inside my skull. I gripped the pen and wrote down the exchange between Darcy and Mr. Taylor word for word, taking care with each letter. When I looked up, Patricia Tripp knelt in front of me, her face red. "Come on," she cried above the music. "Let's go home." Emerson stood behind her. His expression looked remote.

I followed Pat, and Emerson followed me. We descended the stairs and slipped out unnoticed along the fringe of the crowd. People were locked into the dance again, looking nowhere but at each other as Mr. Taylor called out the figures.

As we walked away from the heat of the community center, I pulled in long breaths of cool night air, but still it tasted of dust. "I didn't know," said Pat. "Every time I think everything's all right, I find out something else. Henry?"

I was listening to Grandma Sarah's voice in my head. She was Great-uncle Isaac's sister; I think she knew before anyone else that I would grow old but would never grow up. When I was very young, she took me out in the middle of a wheat field and showed me a huge boulder too large to move. They plowed around it, leaving a little island of wilderness in the middle of the field. "Look, Henry," she said. "This rock has sat here hundreds of years, and it's still here. It sits here in all kinds of weather. No matter what happens to its outside, its heart is safe."

I slid the pen through the spiral at the top of the notebook, then pinched the back of my hand. "But I'm not a stone," I whispered.

"Henry, are you all right?" Pat touched my shoulder.

"Just fine," I said, and stared at her hand until she took it away. She had left the hall without her jacket; her gray dress shimmered in the evening dark like a ghost. There was pity in her face; for the first time since I had met her ten years earlier, I resented her. "Just fine. Kelly, did you see everything you needed to?" My voice sounded calm and detached to me, as if it came out of somebody else's mouth.

"Yes," he said, and gave me half a smile. His eyes met mine in a way no one else's ever had. It was as if he had no history or expectations; whoever I was, he accepted it without fear or any other emotion. I stopped a moment, squinting up at him, looking for the hidden motives Isaac had told me to

watch for. He stopped, too, and looked down at me, his face half-lit from the streetlight down the block. What was it about that waiting face? He was a chameleon, I thought; he had told me so himself. But was that why there seemed to be so little self in his face?

Feeling mystified and somewhat better, I started walking again.

At the gate to Pat's yard, we stopped. I looked at her. "I'm sorry," I said. I had been ready to adopt Great-uncle Isaac's classifications, dividing the world by size, but that wasn't right.

"I am, too," she said, and gave me a smile that would have melted me the day before. Something fundamental inside me had changed since then, and I was not sure what.

"I'll drive you home," Emerson said to me. Pat and I said good night.

We made the trip in silence. I left the notebook and pen on the car seat. As I climbed down from the car just outside the gate to the farm, Emerson said, "That invitation, Henry. It's for tomorrow morning. Can you make it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Pick you up at nine."

In my dreams, I was taller. When I woke, I stared at the slope of ceiling above my bed and wondered how to go downstairs. I could smell coffee brewing and bacon cooking: breakfast time. What would we say to each other? I got dressed and went downstairs because it was my life here in this house.

"Eggs or French toast?" Polly, armed with a spatula, asked me, as she always did.

"One egg over medium, please," I said, as I occasionally did. Fletcher ate and read the paper. Rosalie, strapped into her high chair, chewed on a finger of French toast. Only Chip looked cut loose from routine and miserable.

"It's okay," I said to Chip, after I had gone over about a thousand things in my mind.

"You sure? I wouldn't ever — I didn't mean — oh, Uncle Henry, I . . ."

"I know." I didn't know. Maybe there was a secret side to everybody. "It's okay," I said again, though I didn't think it was.

"What I want to invite you to do," said Emerson as we drove through the morning toward town, "is to choose something from the back seat."

I looked behind me, at all the strange containers piled there. Though the roads were bumpy and rutted from the rigors of winter driving, nothing in Emerson's car shook loose or rattled. "A gift?" I said, remembering our conversation from yesterday.

"A surprise," he said.

I caught my breath. I thought about the nature of surprises. "Yes," I said at last. "I accept your invitation."

He pulled up in front of Pat's house. Pat sat on a white wicker chair, cra-

dling one of her glass paperweights in her lap. Darcy had abandoned his post at Taylor's and sat on the floor beside her chair. There was no one else in sight.

Emerson turned off the engine. When we had both climbed out of the car, he opened the rear doors, letting me look at things from two sides. I studied closed black cases shaped like shadows, and paper bags of all sizes, twisted shut.

On top of the pile, beyond my reach, I noticed a large black case, a deep rectangle, about the size and shape of a truly unabridged dictionary. I pointed to it.

"You're sure?" Emerson asked.

"Yes," I said. I felt angry. Suddenly, it seemed like a game. Perhaps a jack-in-the-box wearing my face would spring out. Or all the diseases and sins of mankind. The box would be empty except for a generic suicide note, which I could individualize by checking appropriate boxes.

Emerson gave me the case. Its handle fitted my hand exactly. It weighed a lot less than an unabridged dictionary or the sins of mankind. I carried it up to Pat's porch, hearing Emerson slam the car doors behind me.

"May we watch?" Pat asked.

"Do you know what's going on?"

"I made a choice last night," she said, and Darcy nodded. One of his hands was fisted around something. Pat glanced at him and smiled. "I made my first real choice in years. The first since my wedding." She met my gaze. "Remember that, Henry?"

I remembered. Abel Tripp, the schoolmaster, had brought her to Civility ten years before, married her in the local church, then died two years later, leaving her his house, his treasures, and his pupils. She looked down at the glass globe in her hand, stroked a finger over its smooth surface, then glanced up at me. "I remember," I said. She had been skinnier back then, nervous, unable to meet eyes. When she first started teaching, she had a habit of closing her right hand about her left, as if holding onto her wedding ring to be sure it wouldn't fall off.

"I played the game last night, too," Darcy said.

"What did you choose?" I asked.

"Show us yours first," said Darcy.

I set the case on the board floor. Emerson stood on the walk, three steps down, his hands slack at his sides. I unfastened four small clasps, then opened the lid.

A mandolin lay in a scooped-out cavity, nested in pale fur. It was round, melon-backed, its wooden face the color of heavily creamed coffee under a thin layer of honey-clear varnish. Abalone fleurs-de-lis decorated its ebony-faced neck.

I reached out a hand. Almost everyone in my family played an instrument, all of them impossibly large for me. I could tuck a fiddle under my

chin, but could not draw the bow any decent length. I had tried playing the old piano up at the main house, but I wasn't successful enough at it to rate practice time, not with four other people who needed it.

I snatched my hand back, remembering the dance the night before. Music was a trap. It had closed on Darcy. I looked at him, my eyes wide. He shrugged.

I lifted the mandolin out of the case. It smelled faintly of lemon furniture polish. Eight strings, very close together, stretched over narrow frets. With my legs crossed, I could hold the mandolin in my lap and curl my hand around the neck just fine. I brushed my right index finger down the strings. The sound was sweet, though disorganized. I pressed a pair of strings down in one of the frets and plucked it, then moved my finger and plucked again. The instrument felt right in my arms. I wanted to know it like I knew my hands. I wanted to master the music it promised; that, more than anything else I could ever do, would link me to my relatives.

I looked at Emerson.

"Does it lift the dust?" he asked.

I looked at Darcy. "It hurts," I said. I closed my eyes, felt the strings still vibrating against my fingers, heard the faintest whisper of notes lingering in the air. "It delights," I said. "Yes. No dust."

"Is it a reason to be here at all?"

"Not yet. Maybe not ever." I hugged it, though. Its surface felt satiny, and there were centuries of music hidden inside it. I could learn to let them out a day or a decade at a time. "It might be." I locked it inside its case again. "Pat? Darcy? What choices did you make?"

They looked at each other. I had never seen them together before. I saw Darcy was not wearing any of his most familiar masks. "You first," he said.

Pat held up a slender flat brown bag. "I chose a bus ticket and a month's reservation in a hotel," she said. "I chose a way to leave."

"You're leaving?"

She set the ticket in her lap and picked up the paperweight, looking at the iridescent flowers inside. "I don't know," she said. "Abel brought me here and gave me this house and all his beautiful things. I love them. I could just stay here forever. When I sit in my living room, I feel like I have roots that go down to the center of the earth, and that's what I came here looking for; my father was in the military, and I spent my whole childhood moving from one place to the next. But what I didn't consider is this is a dull, strict garden and I'm a weed." She set the paperweight down and looked at me. "I miss having real people to talk to. I don't mean the people here aren't real, but I don't want to spend all my time discussing weather and canning and wheat and tractors. And I don't like what happened last night. I wish you had talked to me more, Henry. You were the most interesting student I had. I thought —" She paused and brushed her bangs back off her forehead. "What happened to you?"

"I let the dust cover me." I looked past Emerson at his car, which still looked as if it had just come out of a car wash. I glanced at Darcy.

"You let them fit you into a lifetime coffin, just like I did," he said. "Only I have ways of dealing with it." He hunched his shoulders and let a mask surface. In his way, Darcy was as successful a chameleon as Emerson. I talked to him when we could be alone together, but I didn't even like to look at him when anyone else was around. He could be many different people: a leering idiot, a clumsy idiot, a stupid idiot, or a deaf idiot, but always an idiot. He had scared me even before I knew I was a dwarf.

He relaxed and turned back into his private self. "You keep trying to think your way around it, Henry. Why do you adopt their values when you'll never be one of them? You're me, and you'll never stop being me; it's not something you'll grow out of. You don't make the faces, you don't dance the dance, but they think of you that way anyhow. I think your Uncle Isaac has the right idea. Think of them in terms of another species. Stick up for your own, and do what you have to survive, even if it involves making a fool of yourself. No offense, Mrs. Tripp."

She shook her head. "I feel like another species, too. I love my house, and I like my job. But if I stay here much longer, the dust will get me." She stared at the brown paper bag in her lap. "I *do* want to leave."

I glanced at Emerson. His face held no expression.

"What did you choose, Darcy?" I asked. Darcy's words had swirled up a panic in me. I tried to ignore it.

He unclenched his fist, held out his hand. A red plastic lighter lay on his palm.

"I chose the smallest thing I could see," he said. "But think what's inside here." He smiled and clicked the lighter, staring at the answering flame. "A big power in a small package. I'm going to burn down Taylor's."

"No," said Pat.

"For once in my life, I'm going to do something that really satisfies me. I know I'm not following my own advice; it won't help me survive. But it will make me happy."

"But you can't," said Pat. "The Taylors live there. Everybody in Civility depends on that store."

"I choose to." He clicked the lighter off; the flame disappeared. "And I want you two to help me."

"I'll call the sheriff," she said.

"Lady, you've lived here ten years, and now you're leaving. I've lived here fifty-seven years. I've had a long time to store up resentments. Give me this."

She hugged herself and stared at him for a long time. Then she looked around at her house, at me. I was remembering his dance the night before, and the anger I had felt, wanting — but not letting myself want — to hurt them all. Pat sighed and shook her head. "I guess — if you're not going to

hurt anyone."

"No. I never intended anyone physical harm, just as they never have. All I want's the store. Henry?"

I touched the mandolin case, wondering if Darcy was right — if even music would not help me transcend. Now that I knew Pat liked me, I regretted her leaving, and what Darcy had said felt like a punch in the stomach. I wanted to go somewhere else and think through it. Maybe I had been living wrapped in a dream all along, and waking up was the worst nightmare.

"What?" I said.

"Will you help me?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Decoy the Taylors out of the store somehow before I set my fire."

"All right."

"Mrs. Tripp? You wet down your lawn real good, stop the fire from spreading, okay?"

"I'll do that," she said.

Chip and Isaac helped me build the flying saucer. "Flat, like two plates stuck together, but about two feet across, with lots of little blinking lights around the edge, and hardware and antennas. It should make a weird noise, too," I said. We built it in Isaac's room. The fumes from Chip's model glue nearly knocked us silly, but we worked all afternoon.

Inside, it was a mass of wires, batteries, packing to hold everything in place, Christmas tree lights, and one half of a pair of walkie-talkies, switched on. For the top and bottom we used cheap aluminum roasting pans which Isaac reshaped to make them round; I smoothed putty over the more obvious dents and crinkles, and Chip glued miscellaneous car parts all over. We spray-painted the outer shells silver before fastening them around the mess of mechanism and running a strip of clear red plastic around the edge so the lights could blink through it. Chip used phosphorescent paint to add a series of strange lines and swirls and what appeared to be writing on the upper surface. We built a stand out of pieces from someone's Erector set. Then we stood back and admired our work.

"It looks terrific, Uncle Henry, but what are you going to use it for?" asked Chip.

"I can't tell you unless you promise never ever to tell — cross your heart, blood, the whole bit." I hoped he would promise; he would probably hear about it soon enough.

He took a pin out of the tip of one of the glue tubes, wiped it off on his jeans, and pricked his thumb. "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye," he said. I pricked my finger and pressed my blood to his. We stared at each other, and I felt the breach between us from the night before had been healed — maybe only until next time, but for now, we were family again.

Isaac, who was carving little creatures to stick on our saucer, just watched. He had set his pipe aside until the fumes cleared. I knew I wouldn't have to swear him to secrecy; he never told anyone anything if he could help it.

I had been determinedly not thinking about anything except my saucer all afternoon. Now I turned my mind on again. "I'm going to play a trick on the Taylors," I said, and explained part of it to them.

When I had finished, Chip's eyes were gleaming. "This is great," he said. "I hope you get more ideas like this, Uncle Henry."

Chip helped me smuggle the saucer, the mate to the walkie-talkie, and a battery-driven electric razor out of the house that evening and down to the gate. "I wish I could go with you," he said when we set the things in the grass.

"No, Chip. This is dangerous."

"How could it possibly be dangerous? Unless Mr. Taylor wallop you one when he figures it out. You ought to take me along for protection. I'm taller than you now."

"It's very dangerous. You'll find out tomorrow. Remember your oath."

He sketched a cross over his heart. "I swear."

"Get back up there and cover for me. Tell Polly I have a hot date."

"A hot date?" He giggled and ran off into the twilight.

The night was beginning to smell like cool steel, and the grass, freighted with dew, seemed more substantial in the darkness, when Emerson drove up. The dogs around the barn burst into barks. Emerson helped me put the saucer in the car. It winked and blinked and glowed; we had neglected to add an on-off switch, so I had been watching the saucer perform for the past half-hour.

"Nice work," said Emerson. "Darcy already poured the gasoline. Just get them out of the house and everything will go fine."

"Do you ever get caught?"

"No."

"I expect to get caught."

"Choice is a great power, Henry. It can cut you if you're not careful. You have to live with the consequences of your choices."

"Who are you? Are you some — some catalyst for chaos? Is this what you do: stir people up and leave them to face the consequences? How come you tell me all these laws of choice when they don't seem to affect you? Are you beyond the law?"

"No, Henry. I am living out my consequences, too."

I looked at his profile, underlit by green dashboard light. For a moment his face seemed to vanish, and I looked at the side view of a skull. It turned toward me, its eyes pits of shadow, its naked teeth gleaming.

I took a deep breath and gripped the seat with both hands.

"I don't know what you'll do with this information," he said. His face had reformed over its bones, and he was wearing the same quirky smile he had worn at our first meeting. "I don't usually give it to people."

"I will probably," I said, "write about it."

I set the saucer in a dusty depression in the weedy vacant lot next to the school yard. The saucer blinked and beckoned, splashing blotches of colored light on the dusty grass around it. I put the loose walkie-talkie, with the transmit button taped on, and the electric razor, also on, in the school equipment shed, muffling them under a tarp. Motor noises emerged from the saucer.

I ran down the street to Taylor's General Store and around the back, then up the staircase to bang on the door. "Mr. Taylor! Miz Taylor," I cried, upper register. "They've landed! Itsy bitsy little aliens, down by the school yard. Come and see!"

I knew for a fact that Jacob Taylor read the *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, and the *Globe* front to back every week. He regaled his customers with the best items: foreign ritual murders that left bodies in bits around the house, women impregnated by space invaders or household objects, children raised by wild animals. He made a special point of telling me about all the latest freaks.

News of the aliens got them up and out. I was halfway down the block when the two of them emerged, bathrobes flapping. Jacob hefted an ancient blunderbuss he probably hadn't shot off in years. "This way," I screamed, hoping distance would grant me anonymity, and dashed off toward my saucer.

For a moment it even fooled me. I thought I saw things moving past its phosphorescent streaks, and I heard high yipping noises like the twitter of baby birds. When the Taylors saw it, they stopped and stared. I left them and ran back toward the store.

Orange flames licked upward. They swept up the sides of the weathered old building. The fire quickly turned to rage, eating the oxygen out of the air, smoke piling upward in heavy black shrouds, flames creating their own wind, crackling like new-laid gravel under the wheels of a heavy vehicle. The smell of a wood fire, one of my favorite smells in the world, began to crowd at me, to turn into stink. I ran past the burning store, ducking between people who had walked up and gathered to watch, and I opened the gate to Pat's yard.

She stood among the trees with her hose in her hand, watching the fire. The ground squished under my feet. She must have been soaking the grass all afternoon. I went and stood beside her, and she put her hand on my shoulder.

Darcy was there, too, standing against a tree, his hands in his pockets, watching. I looked at him, saw flames reflected in his eyes. He looked more

relaxed than I could ever remember seeing him.

When the roof fell in and fountains of sparks gushed skyward, Pat put her thumb over the end of the hose, spraying water up into the trees so wayward sparks would not set them burning.

"That's for everything they said and did," said Darcy.

"For everything they thought," I said, then realized I was condemning good as well as bad. Pat had thought some things I had never known. "For everything I imagined they thought," I said. That didn't make it right; it made me feel like I was watching part of myself burn. "For the dust," I said, seeing the flame as a scouring fire, burnishing surfaces, uncloseting bones, eating the masks and disguises. It was all the weapons I had imagined but never held.

"For the dust," said Darcy. He reached out and touched my head.

Later, a lone fire engine came clamoring up. It had had to be roused from the volunteer fire department in Goshen, fourteen miles away. It scattered spectators and sprayed the fire into submission. The wet, smoke-sodden ruins smelled much worse than the fire had. Stacks of half-burned merchandise tottered and collapsed under the onslaught of the water. Some of it fell at our feet, including the blank book I am writing this in. I stooped and retrieved it. Then Pat said, "Come on, Henry, Darcy. Let's go inside and make tea."

The scent of smoke haunts these pages, even as it haunts my memories. When I practice my mandolin (which Fletcher is teaching me, as the fingering is the same as that on a violin), I keep thinking I hear the lick of fire under the notes.

Jacob Taylor shot my saucer to smithereens; he told everyone that tiny aliens had aimed rayguns at him. He blamed them for the fire, so I, like Emerson, remain uncaught.

Pat used her bus ticket, promising a postcard, and left Darcy as caretaker of her house, her cats, and her things. Some wonder about that, but I refuse to listen to those stories, though everything else is fair game now.

My dreams are full of the glee of flames. I watched a lot of things burn up in Darcy's fire, including parts of myself. The dust that covered my old dreams is gone now. I wonder if I can start a fire by rubbing paper with the tip of a pen? Especially paper already impregnated with smoke, like this. •

LESSER BEASTS
by George Zebrowski
art: Nicola Cuti



George Zebrowski lives in Johnson City, New York, where he makes his living as a science-fiction novelist, short-story writer, and editor. His short stories have appeared in Analog, Aboriginal SF, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Universe 16, and Twilight Zone. His most recently released novel is The Stars Will Speak (Harper & Row), and his upcoming works include Behind the Stars (Harper & Row), Nebula Awards 22, and Synergy 1 (both HBJ).

“. . . if suddenly there was a threat to this world from some other species from another planet outside in the universe, we would forget all the little local differences that we have between our countries and we would find out once and for all that we are all human beings here on this earth together.”

— Ronald Reagan, speaking to Mikhail Gorbachev,
The New York Times, December 5, 1985.

In the darkness, he lay next to her in bed and said, “The French were out, we were in. A few of them had the guts to tell us what we were up against, and the lid came down. Even Moscow came in on the cover story because they knew we had to stop the alien invasion in secret, or not at all.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked. “We were the only aliens in Vietnam.”

“Think so?” he said. “Then you bought the cover story like everyone else.”

A match snapped. The flame cast the shadow of his hand across the ceiling. Chrissy listened to him take a drag and exhale. The cigarette was a small red star in the darkness.

“It’s the truth,” he said in a strained voice, and she realized with a start that he was about to confess something he had held back for a long time. Maybe now she would find out why they were no good together. He might say something that would change her mind about leaving him.

Guilt and fear mingled with her sorrow for him. Left alone, he might kill himself, or wipe out a fast-food place, or something as stupid. She felt that he needed to win out over something, kill whatever was eating him inside. She had struggled not to hate or pity him, even though he had become shabby, inviting contempt; the time was near when she could no longer hold back.

“You think it’s just a tall story, don’t you?” he asked.

She patted his arm to ease the bitterness she felt flowing from him.

He jabbed her in the ribs with his elbow. “When they take over and make you fuck them, you’ll know it’s true!”

She was silent, cowed by his vehemence.

He put out his cigarette, then took her with a great show of determination. She disappeared into his rage.

He was afraid of something, so he bullied her to drive out his fear.

“What is it?” she whispered when he was still. “Tell me.” She had not tried to fake her enjoyment of him, and that made her feel guilty.

“They sit inside human beings and steal our pleasures,” he mumbled with tears on his face. “One day we’ll all fuck for them. No more love, no kids, no future.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, unable to accept the thought that he was insane, desperate to justify what he had done in Vietnam.

He rolled on his back next to her. She took a deep breath.

"Tell me about it," she said, afraid. "I'll listen. How else can I understand you, Nick?"

She tensed, expecting to be struck, but he only laughed. "Sure, but I know you're only playing along because you're afraid of me. You won't believe until I show you."

"What do you mean?" she asked gently.

"There's a base in the forest," he said in a stranger's creaky voice. "It's been there nearly forty years. It kills when you come near it, just like a bug zapper. So we could only get at them when they were away from the base, which wasn't often, but I ran into one. It was almost the first thing that happened to me over there. I killed the thing by pure dumb luck, firing wild. A few weeks later I went back and picked up the small bones that were left. I got them with me."

She waited for him to continue, fearful of infuriating him with any sign of skepticism.

"They're about a foot tall, but they remind you of a spider with four legs. They sit on your back like children, and their probe cables reach into your heart and brain, and into your genitals, so they can give you what you need, as a reward." He lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply.

She felt that way with him, that she had to pacify him sexually, so he wouldn't hurt her.

"Can you show me the bones?" she asked, instantly regretting the question.

"Sure," he replied calmly and turned on the light. He got out of bed, stumbled to the closet, and rummaged around in the old chest that he kept there.

At the heart of every delusion there had to be a real hurt, she thought, watching his wiry body bend over the chest.

"Here it is," he said, dangling a string of small bones from his right hand as he came back to bed. He rattled them at her and puffed on his cigarette until the ash fell off. "These are alien, from inside a creature that evolved countless light-years away." He rattled them again, as if that were proof by itself. "Yeah, I know it's not much, but they're enough for me. You'd need a lab to show you they're not like anything from here." He was silent for a moment. "I'm glad I killed one of them."

He put the bones carefully on the night table, crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray, and got back into bed.

"Do you want to hear more or not?" he demanded.

"I really do," she said softly, swallowing. He was sweating heavily, she noticed.

"The base is there," he insisted. "People disappear in that area. The Nam fight got all mixed into it, but it gave us the perfect cover to go in. Expeditions were sent to penetrate the base. My company went in toward the last

charted zapper perimeter, but we didn't know the aliens had moved it, so half of us were fried as we walked into the field. Fast. A flash — and you were a pile of bones and warm dust. But this time they decided to take specimens. The rest of us were only knocked senseless and taken inside the base, where we awoke in these strange tanks filled with liquid. We'd be conscious for a while, then drift off into endless dreams. I'd come to, shivering and hungry, shriveled like a prune in the slimy wetness, and I'd listen to the others crying as they dreamed."

"But you got out. How'd you do that?"

"Maybe I didn't, and my whole life is just one of their dreams that I can't shake." His voice broke, and she thought that he would weep, but he only turned on his side and looked at her with his brown eyes. She saw that he hadn't gotten out; he was still back there in every way that mattered. "I think they just threw me out with the garbage one day," he continued bitterly. "Maybe I just didn't respond well enough to their dream probes. I awoke in the jungle, under a pile of naked bodies. I knew who they were, though you couldn't have recognized any of them. I reached around for their dog tags, but they were gone." He pressed his lips together for a moment. "I was supposed to have died in that pile, Chrissy, but I got up and went through the jungle until I scared a bunch of women who were doing their wash. I was a skeleton. I should've died, Chrissy."

She was trying to believe every word he said, in the way that victims of kidnappers believe their captors, because they have to.

He looked at her without blinking, as if she didn't exist. "I didn't remember any of it for a while after I got home," he said. "The tank — they came into the liquid with us, attached themselves to our backs. They made us screw each other. Take a look here!"

He showed her two old scars on his back. They still looked like knife wounds to her, as described in his medical report.

"That's where they connected into me, Chrissy! But I must not have been any good to them, so they just threw me away!"

He'd see her leaving him as being thrown away again, she thought.

"But I'm alive, and I'm going to kill as many of them as I can! I'm going to get them for what they did, and are still doing. People are still there, our people, floating around like marinating meat, and they've got no one to get them out!" He was shaking as he spoke. She tried to rub his shoulder, but he pushed her away.

"Nick," she said as he trembled, "why hasn't this been made public?"

He seemed to calm down. "Because human beings are soft, Chrissy," he said with a weary irony. "They'd seek contact with the invader, talk as if to God. Only a few understand the danger. It's better that most of humanity doesn't know."

"Why have they come, Nick? Just to be mean?"

"They're studying us, finding out what we're like inside. Once they really

know what pushovers we are, they'll move against the whole world."

"Nick, try to understand that all I know is what you say."

He grimaced. "Yeah, sure, I know. Do you want to wake up as a component in some alien mind? That's another thing they're here for, to get parts."

She was silent, afraid to push him with another critical question.

"They take bits and pieces of us," he continued, "and make patchwork minds. If they get a hybrid they like, they make it reproduce itself. They like to collect odd logic patterns from the minds and nervous systems of alien species. It gives them new ways of looking at the universe. They're greedy for strange ways of seeing and feeling."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

He touched her hand. There was no trembling in him now. "Believe me, I know," he said. "I've killed a few of them right here in the streets."

"What?" she asked, afraid.

He looked at her with a vast, pitying conviction as he held her limp hand. "You want to think I'm crazy so you won't have to believe me."

"But Nick, you've got it so twisted. Can't you see? You don't have to believe these things. What happened to you was bad enough. Look what it made you think."

He laughed suddenly, and she was relieved that he wasn't going to get violent. Maybe he'd been putting her on all along?

"You don't know anything," he said coldly. "How could you? But they're right here in Miami, coming in from Central America, walking around as if they were people. I'll show you."

"And you want to stop them?"

He shrugged. "As many as I can. They have to be stopped."

Nick was gone when she awoke the next morning. She dressed and crossed the canal to her sister's house.

Marie seemed to listen patiently.

"I'm so afraid," Chrissy said, "when I think of what my life has become. He was so different once."

"Was he?" Marie asked distantly.

"Oh, he never talked much, but I always knew he cared deeply about me. It's not so strange for him to open like this and tell me these crazy things. I'm glad he wants to tell me —"

"Has he got a new job?" Marie asked, sounding bored.

"He did, at the bakery, but they fired him for some reason. He wouldn't tell me why. Maybe he quit; I don't know. I'm out looking, but we're okay until the unemployment runs out."

"Maybe you should get him to see a psychiatrist," Marie said, sipping her coffee and looking out the kitchen window. Chrissy noticed the wrinkles on her sister's neck.

"He'd never go."

Marie looked at her fixedly. "How about the Veterans' Administration?" "They don't encourage vets to come to them," she said bitterly, "not with mental problems."

Marie looked at her even more carefully, making her nervous with her scrutiny. Chrissy knew what she was thinking: silly blonde bitch, you're better looking than I am, and you stay with that runt.

"You don't think he's really nuts, do you?" Marie asked.

Chrissy's stomach churned.

"Look," Marie continued, "why does it have to be your job? He's a pathetic killer ape, who went like a sheep when they drafted him, and bullied an agricultural people he knew nothing about. I don't hold the other side was any better, but you'll be an old hag by the time you get your life together again, if you ever do."

"You're being too hard on him," Chrissy whispered, holding back tears.

"It's up to you. Either get some help for him or leave. You're wasting your life away. I'll put you up for as long as you need."

Chrissy looked at her sister. Marie was too ready to have her come stay with her. She was lonely, but wouldn't admit it. She didn't like to remember that her man had spent the war at a desk and had been killed while typing, by a mortar shell, just a few days before the abandonment of Saigon.

"I can't leave him now," Chrissy said, "not yet anyway. He wants to take me and prove what he's saying is true. I don't know what to do."

Marie shrugged and took another sip of coffee. "Then go with him. What's the harm? It'll prove he's screwy."

The noon sun was hot on Chrissy's head as she came out of her sister's house and walked back to the canal cross-bridge. Sweat ran down her face, and she resented Nick's taking the jalopy. It was a wreck, but he kept it working, even the aged air conditioning. She remembered the Chevy when it had been new, when Nick had first dated her in high school. They'd made love in the back seat, and he'd gotten very quiet and held her for a long time after. The future had been wide open. They would grow closer together, no matter what happened. She had been so sure of that.

She stopped at the small bridge. A man was coming across. He was over-dressed, wearing a long coat, his head hunched down. He passed her and she started across. Halfway, she paused and looked back. He was hurrying and the heat didn't seem to bother him at all. She turned away.

As she came off the bridge, she remembered how helpful Nick had been in finding her a job after graduation. He'd been so earnest, buying her newspapers, collecting letters of recommendation from friends, giving her advice on how she should dress. He had smiled a lot. Suddenly, she wanted him to be right about what he had told her. She'd have to leave him if he was crazy. Could she leave him if he was sick? Could she be so heartless? No — she'd force him to get help, no matter what it took. Marie was right about that

part.

She stopped and looked back across the bridge. The darkly clothed man had stopped and was looking at her. Her stomach tightened, but then she saw that his lack of motion was an illusion; the figure was still receding, rippling in the heat waves. The sun was getting to her, she thought as she turned away and went up the palm-lined walk toward her house.

It was a hot, muggy August Monday when Nick took her alien-hunting. She went along because she thought it might help if they did more things together.

They took the bus downtown. Nick let her window-shop for a while. Then they went into Walgreen's on Flagler and had tall milk shakes at the soda fountain. Nick seemed calmer. He even smiled as he finished his chocolate shake, as if he were glad to be with her. Suddenly, it seemed possible that he would forget all about the things he had told her, and their lives would begin anew.

"See that guy there, Chrissy," Nick said as they came out on the street, "the one with the heavy sport coat? He's one of them."

"But why him?" she asked with dismay.

"He's overdressed, for one thing."

She remembered the overdressed man on the canal bridge.

"Is that all you're going on?" she demanded.

"There's a feeling coming out of him," Nick said. "You can't pick it up yet."

He took her hand. She felt numb as they followed the man. He stopped at a Cuban coffee stand. They pretended to window-shop as the man downed the small cup of black liquid.

"They're so arrogant," Nick said as the man went on his way. "We're only beasts to them, but this critter will surprise him."

He's only a Cuban merchant, she thought, a bit underweight and sensitive to chills, nothing more. He'd notice us if he were anything else.

The man turned right at the white-washed walls of the Gesu Parochial School and kept going until he came to the railroad tracks. Nick let go of Chrissy's hand and waited for him to cross.

"Come on!" he hissed at her suddenly.

Chrissy hurried across after him, as if he were about to disappear over the edge of the world.

A chill passed through her as a squall came in off the Atlantic. Dust blew up on the sidewalks. Coconuts fell off nearby palm trees. On the far side of the tracks, the Cuban slipped into a driveway between two wood-frame houses. Nick disappeared after him.

It wasn't a driveway, but a narrow street, she saw as she caught up. Nick was creeping up behind the Cuban. She watched in a trance as Nick chopped him on the back of the neck and the man collapsed. Nick had been

so fluidly matter-of-fact about it.

She watched anxiously as Nick took out his knife.

"No, don't!" she shouted suddenly and ran forward.

Nick pushed her away as she tried to grab his arm, and sliced open the man's coat.

"Nick, don't!" she pleaded, unable to speak above a whisper.

The stranger had a lot of body hair, she noticed as Nick cut away the coat and white shirt.

"Nick, please!" she shouted, looking around at the windows.

"Shut up, will you?" He held the knife near the man's neck.

It was all over. Nick was crazy. She had lost him.

"Come here!" he shouted. "Touch it! Be sure!"

"Nick, we've got to get out of here! Someone will see us!" She saw herself visiting him in prison, waiting for him to die.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into a squat over the body.

"Look!"

Her vision blacked out for a moment, and she saw the thing on the man's back. It looked like a bruise buried deep in the muscles, shaped like a spider, but the center was still on the surface.

"Touch it!" Nick ordered.

She drew back, but he grabbed her hand and forced it into the sliminess. She felt a sudden thrill as she handled it, feeling the soft textures, and she knew that it didn't want to be handled and known in this way. Rain began to fall. The wet, sluglike center seemed to fluoresce as she squeezed it, knowing that she held it at the edge of death. Her feelings raced, building into pride for her man and hatred for the alien enemy. Nick had been a hero of humanity in Vietnam.

She cried out in relief and triumph as Nick cut the invader with his big knife. Alien blood oozed over the Cuban's back and was washed away by the rain. Nick lifted the man's head and cut his throat. Red blood ran with blue on the asphalt.

"The poor guy," Nick said. "He won't have to struggle anymore."

"We'll kill them together," she said, gulping air as she watched the blood reach the drain. The aliens would bleed, and the earth would soak up their blood. It would serve them right for coming here.

She looked up and let the rain wash her face. When she looked back, the Cuban's back was bare.

"They reach out and erase themselves in your mind," Nick explained. "Then you have to feel around to find them, but they're still there, hoping you'll go away and give them a chance to repair themselves."

She watched as he finished the job with his knife. The blood appeared out of nowhere, and she felt the hatred streaming from the dying alien. It was familiar. She had sensed it from the overdressed man on the canal bridge.

"More of them are coming out of Nam every year," Nick said. "We'll have

to kill all we can find."

She felt dizzy and grateful in the rain. The way Nick had come back, broken and empty of pride, so dedicated to a delusion, had been too much for her. But that was all over now. Aliens had come to the forests of Earth. Nick and she would hunt them down and kill them together.

That night, as they slept side by side, she dreamed with him, traveling deeply into the heart of his fears. His truth became her truth because it was the truth. She saw an alien fetus-thing struggling to be reborn through human flesh, and she woke up hating, full of courage.

Nick's breathing was regular, the smell of his sweat strong. Together they had found two more invaders in the Bay Park, near the library, just after dark.

She trembled as she listened to Nick's breathing, remembering how much she had first wanted him, despite his thoughtless manner. The aliens had reached into an ordinary human being, and had awakened a brave man to action. He was happy, now that she was with him. Everything was okay again.

Marie gazed at her coldly. "He made you see it, you silly bitch. He did it to himself and pulled you in with him, so you wouldn't have to think he's a killer."

Chrissy felt sorry for her, but at least Marie wasn't one of them. She couldn't be blamed for not believing. What could she know? She had no one to set her straight.

But she has me, Chrissy thought. "I know what I saw, Marie. Come on, I'll show you. I've got to."

Marie shook her head and looked out the window. Chrissy took her hand. It was cold and trembling, nothing like the composed face.

Marie shook free. "Go away."

"Marie, I've got to show you."

"Chrissy, you've got to get help for yourself," she said with a show of calm, but her voice cracked. "It's too late for Nick, but they might still help you."

Chrissy grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her from the kitchen chair. Marie staggered to her feet, then sat down on the floor with a thud.

"Get out of here, Chrissy! Leave me alone. You're a nut case!"

"It's okay — honest, it's okay," Chrissy said, helping her up. "Come with me and you'll see for yourself, you'll see!"

Marie pushed her away.

"We'll all be together," Chrissy said.



SCIENCE FICTION AND HISTORY

ESSAY

by Poul Anderson

Poul Anderson has been writing science-fiction stories and science essays for four decades, his first published story having appeared in 1947. His better-known novels include Brain Wave, The High Crusade, Tau Zero, and Three Hearts and Three Lions. His most recent novel is the four-volume historical fantasy The King of Ys, written in collaboration with his wife, Karen.

The work of Gregory Benford is always interesting. His essay "Pandering and Evasions" (*Amazing Stories*, January 1988) is no exception, and not merely because it says a couple of nice things about me. It seems to call for a response — not a rebuttal, because I have no quarrel with it, but a little further exploration of one topic he brings up in passing.

Rightly deplored the unimaginative and unconvincing social backgrounds of too many science-fiction stories, he mentions "the unexamined assumption that liberal capitalism (or, more rarely, state socialism) will form the backdrop of societies centuries from now. . . . Worse, there are even semifeudal regimes invoked in high-tech societies. . . . Similarly, writers who sing of empire had better examine their assumptions. The solar system is a vast place, with radically different environments. Does the reflexive analogy to the old European empires, with their imperial fleets and rural colonies of docile natives, make any sense?"

Excellent points. However, they deserve closer examination. To what extent can we reasonably model the future on the present or the past? Of course, events never repeat themselves exactly, and it is debatable to what extent classes of events do, but this is at the very least a legitimate debate. What kinds of change in the human

condition are reversible and what kinds are not? Does it or doesn't it make sense to imagine future Caesars, future Jeffersons and Bolívars, future Carnegies, and so on?

I don't believe anybody has any sure answers. Certainly I don't. Still, we can look at the record and make a few suggestions, for whatever they may be worth.

Let's begin with the record of science fiction itself. Quite a few stories suppose that developments to come will resemble developments that have already occurred, and some of these stories are by well-regarded, rather cerebral writers. We might hark back to Robert Heinlein's old "future history" series, which has raw colonialism, including indentured labor, appear on the planets and religious dictatorship arise at home. Soon afterward came Murray Leinster's classic "First Contact," wherein the characters take for granted that the aliens they encounter could be murderous bandits or imperialists. In recent years, Jerry Pournelle has described wars, revolutions, and empires among the stars (and so have I). Contrastingly, Larry Niven depicts a solar system under the governance of the United Nations. At first glance this may look different from anything hitherto, but in fact the society is quite Western; and the ideal of the UN as a peace-keeping force antedates the organization itself. Isaac Asimov's

Foundation saga has a Galactic Empire develop. Perhaps this takes place peacefully, though little is said about that; in any case, eventually the state displays all the traditional trappings of despotism, and decays along the same lines as Rome did. We could go on at length, but these examples ought to suffice.

Some stories have indeed shown future societies unlike any of the past. Among them is "The Heart of the Serpent," by the late Soviet writer Ivan Efremov. He wrote it explicitly as a response to "First Contact." In it, humans and aliens also meet in deep space, but good will and mutual trust are immediate because any civilization that has developed to the point of making interstellar voyages must necessarily have evolved beyond warlikeness or banditry. In a letter to me, Efremov opined that either humankind will soon cross that threshold or else it will destroy itself, so he figured he might as well make the optimistic assumption. Other writers in the Eastern bloc generally do likewise, although several include ironies and dilemmas in their work.

The question is, How likely are we to undergo basic changes, for better or worse? Can we? Certain of the writers who reply "yes" have given us fascinating imagined futures to think about — to name only three, Benford himself, Greg Bear, and William Gibson. Time may prove them correct in principle. I simply wish to argue that in our present state of ignorance, "no" and "maybe" are answers just as intellectually respectable. The single thing I feel sure of is that nobody has foreseen or will foresee the real future; whatever comes to pass, we are bound to be surprised.

To make my case, I shall have to show that recurrence of institutions

and patterns of events is not absurd. This is already implicit in the better stories that employ that assumption. Benford mentions Niven and Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty*, in which neo-feudalism is a logical consequence of high-tech. But let me now step out of science fiction and look at the matter from a wider perspective.

We live in an era of many revolutions. Are any of them irreversible? For example, what will be the effect of nuclear weapons on war? They have definitely failed to abolish it. Have they, though, made all-out, life-and-death strife between the great powers, in the manner of World War Two, impossible? If not, will such a conflict terminate civilization, or will it end in a negotiated peace of exhaustion, or will it have a clear winner? While the last of these propositions is highly unfashionable in the West, it is not unthinkable, being a keystone of Soviet military doctrine.

Even if no nuclear wars are ever fought on Earth, conceivably they will be waged in space, perhaps fairly often, with the victors then controlling the "high ground" and able to dictate terms. This situation bears resemblances to wars between city-states in Renaissance Italy, which were usually carried on by mercenaries. Disunited and without effective citizen forces, the peninsula became the booty of foreigners, such as the French and Spanish. We can imagine the United States and the Soviet Union, neglecting their strength on Earth in favor of their space weapons, suddenly threatened by a vast, modernized Chinese army. The details would make for an interesting, if melodramatic story.

Mind you, I do not say this will ever happen or that it ever can. I simply offer it as one supposable analogue of past history.

For the past gives us our only real clues to the future. The present is too small a slice of time, a mere interface between what has been and what will be. Although nearly all primitive societies are, today, extinct or dying, we should include the findings of anthropology in our historical studies. They help show us how various and unpredictable our species is.

After all, the high-tech West comprises a scanty fraction of Earth's population and occupies rather little of the acreage. While Benford declares, with much justice, that "thinking about a future that is urban, diverse, technology-driven, and packed with ambiguities" is "what SF is about," the majority of mankind still lives in rural environments, under conditions that have changed only superficially from the early Iron Age or the late Stone Age. Its institutions and ways of thinking haven't altered a great deal either. When change has occurred, the consequences have more often been catastrophic than benign; see any slum, urban or rural, anywhere on our planet. Adoption of modern technology has not usually gone together with Americanization.

Therefore it seems unrealistic to take for granted that the high-tech minority will engulf the backward majority. Maybe; or maybe the present gap between them will widen until we almost have two separate species; or maybe high-tech will founder.

Let's assume that it will survive. The alternatives are so depressing. Moreover, survival does look probable. How far will it develop, though? Could it regress for reasons internal to itself?

One hopes not. These days it is chic among Western intellectuals to sneer at "technofixes." Nevertheless, technofixes are what have largely given us

our civilization, or our very humanity. They began with hominids taming fire and making the first crude tools. They went on through agriculture, with everything that that brought about in the way of cities, literacy, and (alas) government. I need hardly describe what the subsequent technofixes of medicine and scientific instrumentation have meant to the human spirit.

On the whole, technological revolutions have been irreversible. This is true even when their immediate effects have been bad. A case in point is early agriculture. Without romanticizing the life of hunter-gatherers, we must admit — archaeology and anthropology have shown — that it was easier, more free, and less subject to famine and disease than the life of a peasant in the ancient riparian kingdoms. However, agricultural societies could support denser populations and muster far more force; hence they either swamped the hunters or the latter took up a similar way of life. (This is an oversimplification, of course, but basically right. Where the environment was more favorable, as in Europe, farmers lived better than in the original civilizations.)

There was never any large-scale reversion. Occasionally and locally, societies collapsed and people went back to a rude existence. Examples include Greece after the fall of Mycenaean civilization and the Guatemala-Yucatán area after the decline of the Mayas. Yet everything that had been learned continued to be practiced elsewhere. No important art has ever been lost, nor has any minor one been for any significant length of time.

On this analogy, we can expect that high-tech will not disappear, short of a planetwide catastrophe. If such destruction does occur, probably the knowledge will be preserved here and there, and will be put back to work

after new societies have become secure and wealthy enough. (The knowledge of how to build good roads and bridges did not vanish when Rome fell, it simply lay in abeyance for a thousand years or so.) To be sure, those societies will doubtless be quite different from the old, and confront different conditions. For instance, they will have inherited a world poorer in natural resources than it once was, and be forced to adjust their technologies to that — something I looked into in *Orion Shall Rise* and other stories.

But I see nothing inevitable about high-tech spreading to all humanity or continuing indefinitely to get higher and higher. Indeed, the latter seems quite unlikely. Growth curves characteristically have an S shape; they rise sharply for a while, then taper off toward a plateau. The potential for continued advance may remain, but economic and other social factors prevent its realization. Some major developments have actually been aborted.

An example is Chinese seafaring. Under the Ming Dynasty, expeditions went throughout Southeast and South Asia, crossed the Indian Ocean, and rounded the southern tip of Africa. The imperial bureaucrats then called a halt, ordered the demolition of every deep-water ship, and forbade anyone to leave the empire on pain of death. It has been pointed out that this was not altogether a bit of witless reaction. The voyages had just been for purposes of prestige; enormously costly, they returned no profit.

Meanwhile the Europeans, who did stand to gain, were sailing eastward from the Cape of Good Hope and westward across the Atlantic. . . . The parallels to our space program are a little chilling.

Despite the obstacles, it is possible

that everyone will eventually come into the high-tech fold. Corresponding things have happened before. Again, the most obvious example is civilization itself. This was invented in the Old World only once or twice; archaeologists disagree whether the Indus Valley peoples got the idea independently or it spread from the Mesopotamians. In either case, the complex of agriculture, cities, centralized government, etc., gradually diffused almost everywhere south of the Arctic and north of the Sahara Desert, plus, to some extent, Africa farther on. A similar thing happened in the New World, though less completely because the European invasion interrupted it. Here, civilization definitely did have two distinct origins, in Central and South America.

Nevertheless, look what widely divergent forms it took among the assorted nations. Directly or indirectly, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, and more all learned from the Mesopotamians, but none of them much resembled the latter nor each other. The Far East saw cultures still more foreign arise.

The Scientific Revolution began in southern Europe, the Industrial Revolution in northern Europe. By now they have affected the whole world. Most countries have sought to industrialize, with varying degrees of success, and several have contributed outstanding scientists. Yet beneath the shared machinery and shared conventions, how alike are they?

As a fairly trivial but perhaps amusing example, when I was in Brazil the people I met, besides being charming, were highly educated and cultured, splendid specimens of Western civilization; and Brazil is an important country. Now one would think that punctuality is essential to the smooth

running of modern society. But that's an Anglo notion. I soon learned that when a Brazilian said he'd meet me at 9 A.M., he meant sometime before noon; and presently I learned to relax and accept this. Nothing terrible happened.

More seriously, in our century we have seen Russia and China make gigantic efforts to catch up technologically, with impressive results. However, they have not thereby become more like us. They are adapting the new instrumentalities to their societies, rather than the other way around. In a subtler fashion, the same is true of countries such as Japan. There we see people in Western clothes using Western equipment under capitalism and parliamentary democracy — but their own versions, uniquely Japanese beneath the facade.

I do not by any means decry this. It would be tragic for humankind to lose its diversity; our future would then look like an anthill. I simply point out that science fiction is presumptuous and unimaginative when it extrapolates solely from Western, usually American civilization of the late twentieth century. Dominant influences in the future may well come from elsewhere and be, from our present-day point of view, archaic — for example, Japanese paternalism or Islamic zealotry.

It seems equally possible that elements from our own past will return to claim us. While technological revolutions, which do have social consequences, may well be irreversible, social characteristics not immediately related to technology have always been labile. This brings us to the politics of the future.

Some philosophers of history have maintained that it moves, or tends very strongly to move, through cycles; if

events do not repeat, classes of events do. Arnold Toynbee is the best-known of these thinkers. We can identify similarities between the natures and fates of, say, the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, the Chinese Han Dynasty, the Roman Empire, and several others. They cannot be purely coincidental. But it is a matter of interpretation how close the similarities actually are, and a matter of theory what causes them. "The ineluctable logic of events" is a sonorous phrase and gives rise to considerable thought, but it is scarcely comparable to Newton's laws of motion. Still, I'd call it a legitimate starting point for a science-fiction story; *vide*, again, Asimov.

Its implication is that we will make the same old mistakes over and over again, with the same old consequences, though at the time these will always be called new and progressive. As I have remarked elsewhere, the lessons of history aren't really hard to learn; the trouble is that hardly anybody wants to learn them. Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Gods of the Copybook Headings" says this about as well as it has ever been said.

To give illustrations from the present day would be to go into political polemics, which is not my purpose here. Suffice it to say that much is going on that looks quite familiar. The world has repeatedly seen the rise and fall of many analogous institutions and ideals.

Americans naturally tend to think of the future in terms of republican government and democratic ethos. Yet theirs, the oldest continuously existing republic on Earth, has barely passed its two hundredth birthday. Republics have generally been short-lived and democracies (which are not the same thing) still more so. At the moment democracy seems to be in a position,

worldwide, like that of monarchy in nineteenth-century Europe; almost everybody goes through the motions of it, but in most cases this is a pious fiction and the structure is moribund. Many science-fiction stories have depicted it as giving way, in fact if not in name, to the dictatorship of corporate capitalism. In practice, though, private organizations exist on sufferance of the state, and the real dictator is always the man who controls the armed forces and the police. At most, large corporations may be junior partners of government — very junior — and this is possible in just a few countries. Other outfits, such as unions, could as well fill the role, and churches have sometimes been coequal or senior.

Freedom has always been rare and fragile, perhaps because most people don't value it much. Institutions are more likely than not to revert to primitive forms. For example, chattel slavery was essentially abolished in the course of the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth, Nazis and Communists brought back forced labor on an enormously larger scale.

Equality and official compassion are more commonly associated with powerful government than with liberty. Thus, it was not the Roman Republic but the Roman Empire that gave slaves some protection from the grossest forms of abuse. The Empire also saw women, at least in the upper classes, accorded rights and respect comparable to those men enjoyed. There was a feminist movement similar to today's. We know what became of it and of other reformist hopes.

There was, too, a rising tide of superstition, general belief in everything from astrology to necromancy. In other words, Rome had its own New Age. Eventually the Christian Church

took over, and disorganized credulity yielded to organized religion. Perhaps our fundamentalists will play such a part in the future.

The prospect of strong-arm rule, social immobility, racism, sexism, and blind faith is as unpleasant to me as it is to you. I do not say it will come to pass. I merely say that it can, and that stories that depict it are not necessarily by authors who lack imagination.

Nor is it necessarily simpleminded to anticipate no new orderings of society, different in kind from any that have gone before. Though often proclaimed, this advent hasn't happened yet, in thousands of years. Instead, we have gotten changes rung on the same half-dozen or so themes. For example, in many Bronze Age societies and in Perú of the Incas, the economy was not based on exchange as we understand it. Everything that was produced, beyond the simple necessities of life for the commoners who produced it, went to the god-king. He then handed the goods out as he saw fit. Today a less extreme version of this is known as income redistribution in the United States, socialism abroad; and far from being a quantum leap of progress, true communism would amount to the old thing itself.

Granted, countless details of tribalism, monarchy, hierocracy, timocracy, democracy, etc., have varied throughout history, and so has the overall mix. For instance, universal literacy has had a significant influence on political arrangements and processes — though it can as readily strengthen the bonds of the state on the individual as it can set him free. In such interaction of factors lies the possibility of many stories.

Agreed, the future will be no simple replay of the past, and some scenarios will never be seen again. They doubt-

less include the interplanetary Wild West long beloved of science fiction. We won't get the asteroid prospector poking around in his spaceship like the Sierra prospector with his burro. Even if spacecraft become cheap enough, as Eric Drexler's work on nanotechnology suggests may happen, they will be too powerful, too potentially destructive, for us to let just anybody have them. Meanwhile, there will surely be developments unprecedented in history, unforeseen by us all — though science-fiction writers can have fun trying.

Yes, I do expect changes in the future, as radical as were wrought by fire or agriculture or literacy or the scientific method, transforming humanity as profoundly as they did. I think these changes will spring from science and technology, not from anyone's great new blueprint for utopia. It is conceivable that eventually they will bring about a social order that does not carry the seeds of its own destruction. Be that as it may, the outlook is not hopeless. Good societies have in fact flourished now and then, for a while. They can again in times to come.

Yet if we are to have any real control over our tomorrows, we must learn the lessons of our yesterdays. We need to do that even if all we want is to write believable science fiction.

Suggested Reading

A few nonfiction works, chosen almost randomly out of many, which take up some of the matters touched upon in this essay or in the stories that it mentions, are listed below.

V. Gordon Childe, *The Dawn of European Civilization*, sixth ed.; Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1958.
_____, *Man Makes Himself*; New American Library, New York, 1951.
K. Eric Drexler, *Engines of Creation*; Doubleday, New York, 1986.
Sidney Hook, *The Paradoxes of Freedom*; University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1970.
Bertrand de Jouvenel, *On Power*; Viking Press, New York, 1948.
H. J. Muller, *The Loom of History*; Harper & Bros., New York, 1958.
_____, *The Uses of the Past*; Oxford University Press, New York, 1952.
Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*; Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1934.
Amaury de Riencourt, *Sex and Power in History*; David McKay, New York, 1947.
Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, one-volume ed.; Oxford University Press, New York, 1947.



CLOUD MANUFACTORY

We are the cloud spinners
Shaping clouds on the wheel
Of a metal shell
In the midst of water forever tumbling
Under the winds around us.

We are the cloud spinners
Not to be reached by air
And hardly by sea, for turbulence.
Water enters into air
The shell opens
And clouds rise
Tumbling up from wave to wind.
Not for us
Rainfall
Rivers
Wells of fresh water
In dirt and stone.
Clouds bring these to continents,
But we are the cloud spinners
Shaping clouds
Endlessly shifting.

There are faces in the cumulus
Played on by brief emotions
Twisting in the air.
Strange animals lurch into the sky.
Islands of vapor
Are built upon
With flowing castles
For dissolving giants.
We are the cloud spinners
Rising and falling on the wave
Shaping clouds
For the solid land
Behind the wave of the horizon.

We are the cloud spinners
Shaping clouds.

— Ruth Berman

FEET OF THE FLYING DEMON

by Richard R. Smith

art: Nicola Cuti



Richard R. Smith began writing and selling science-fiction stories in the 1950s, and he sold to most SF magazines then on the market. His writing career, however, was interrupted by the Korean Conflict, during which he served with the 101st Airborne Division, the Third Division and Headquarters Eighth Army, receiving two Bronze Stars, the United Nations Service Medal, the Korean Service Medal, and a Unit Citation.

Since SF didn't pay so well in the 1950s, and since he had a wife and three children to support, Richard moved on to other fields, where he sold more than thirty novels and eight hundred short stories. "Feet of the Flying Demon" marks his return to the SF magazines, and he is currently at work on the first novel of an SF trilogy.

— for my daughter and son in the Air Force,
Lieutenant Susan L. Smith and Sergeant Brian P. Smith

“The flying demon will be ready as scheduled,” Lieutenant Ryan reported. “Swanson solved the antigrav problem by beefing them up with some extra units welded on the rear.” She passed a hand across her sweaty forehead. Ironically, while perfecting the greatest demon known to mankind, we had all been so busy that our air-conditioning unit had broken down and no one had time to repair the thing. “The demon will look as if it has a big ass, but its legs and lower portion will be constantly shrouded in smoke and fire effects, so it won’t be obvious.” She paused and looked up at me as I continued to study the schematic color-coded to designate areas of responsibility and problem points. “Walters would like to see you regarding the thousand-eye specification. He thinks he has a solution and wants your approval before finalizing.”

“Fine. Tell him I’ll stop by and see what he’s done.”

“What time factor shall I tell him?”

“The next ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Lieutenant Bentley is waiting to see you. What time should I tell her to come back?”

“Send her in now.”

As Lieutenant Ryan left, I sat behind my desk and straightened my tie. Lieutenant Bentley came in shortly, came to attention before the desk, reported, saluted.

“At ease, Lieutenant. Have a seat.”

Lieutenant Bentley sat in the chair but did not relax. I caught her staring at the stars on my shoulders. Somehow, although having been in rank for quite a while, I still never felt like a general. The rank has advantages and disadvantages. Communicating with officers of lower rank and enlisted persons is often difficult because so many are in awe of the rank of general. I liked the rank of colonel that usually received a good amount of respect and yet was not so high that communications with others became difficult. One of the worst points of being a general is that people quite often tell you what they think you *want* to hear rather than what is most appropriate.

“You arrived yesterday” — I looked over her file and spoke to her without looking up — “and your first official action is to request a transfer to another expeditionary force on another planet under the Conscientious Objection Provision.”

“Sir —”

“Yes?”

“Sir, I told Captain Harris I wanted a transfer as soon as possible, and he

said the only way I could ask for a transfer was to do so under the Conscientious Objection Provision. I —”

“COP,” I interrupted. “COP-out is what it’s called unofficially.”

I paused and she waited a few moments before speaking again. Over the years in rank I had discovered that one way to rattle subordinate officers is to interrupt them.

“Sir, I didn’t want to use the COP provision. But Captain Harris said it’s the only way.”

“You *do* want a transfer?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

“Because —” She swallowed dryly. “Because I don’t like what’s going on here.”

I leaned back in my chair, frowning thoughtfully, and studied Lieutenant Sandra Bentley. She was tall, dark-haired, attractive, and very intelligent according to her records.

“Well,” I said, rising from my chair, “let’s take a few minutes and see what’s going on here.”

We left the office and headed straight for the assembly room where the final touches were being put on the flying demon.

“Attention!”

“At ease.”

The wrenches (the mechanics are nicknamed wrenches) went back to work immediately, while the officers gathered at the front of the demon. Lieutenant Bentley stayed with me — slightly behind and off to one side.

“Sir, I think I’ve solved the thousand-eye problem,” Captain Walters said.

“Good.”

The problem had been that the eye section of the beast allowed only room for three hundred and thirty-three eyes of the size that the original designers specified as being psychologically suitable to impress the Halkorians. Native legend, however, described one thousand eyes.

“Three hundred and thirty-three eyes,” Walters said, nodding to someone at the control console. The 333 eyes glowed from the demon’s face. “On a second layer beneath the first layer — three hundred and thirty-three more eyes.” Two things happened simultaneously: the first 333 eyes glowed less brightly as the dark “flesh” around the eyes became translucent, and 333 more eyes glowed brighter and brighter. Some of the eyes overlapped in their brilliance, but the effect was dramatic. “Third layer — three hundred and thirty-three more eyes.” A third set of 333 eyes glowed until the eye section of the demon became one glowing mass of eyes. The effect was stupendous, incredibly dramatic. The eyes had a commanding, fierce, somewhat frightening, hypnotic effect. You really had the impression those eyes could see anywhere, see anything, see through you, into you. And that’s what we hoped the Halkorians would believe. It was their demon, really. We had

photographed the drawings of their demon of war as shown on the temple walls and constructed our mechanical version twenty-five feet, seven and a quarter inches tall. The problem about the eyes had been discussed considerably. Someone had suggested putting extra eyes in the back of the demon's head, since the demon's rear was never illustrated in the ancient carvings, but that solution had been voted down. Someone had suggested having the demon appear with only 333 eyes, but techs had pointed out that some of the Halkorian natives could estimate rapidly enough to see that the demon's eyes were only in the hundreds, and we wanted to have a zenith of plausibility.

"And the thousandth eye," Walters said. The person at the control console pushed a button, and an immense eye in the center of all those hundreds of eyes glowed fiercely. The glow was as intense as a searchlight, blinding. "The thousandth eye, actually, is made up of sixteen eyes on each layer, in the center."

"Brilliant."

"It was Lieutenant Springer's idea, sir."

"Exterior mechanicals is not his department."

"I know, sir, but he was here when I came up with the idea of layered eyes and said, 'But what the hell can I do for the last eye?' He suggested making the thousandth eye a merger of sixteen from each of the three layers."

I waved a hand to indicate they could shut down the demonstration.

"Good job. We're ready to roll now?"

"Yes, sir. Except for last-minute touches. Five- and ten-minute jobs . . ."

Walters glanced at his wrist watch. "We'll be ready for the sacrificial ceremony approximately forty-five minutes from now."

"Where's Lieutenant Springer?"

For a moment everyone looked at everyone else. Some faces were blank, some looked guilty.

"I'm not sure, sir. I . . . uh . . ."

"Open up the demon."

Two of the internals were sitting or standing positions, but the third was an extremely comfortable couch with a maze of controls in the ceiling and walls of the command cubbyhole. First Lieutenant Springer was in charge of the computer synchronization and response systems. He'd been working long hours and, instead of returning to his quarters for naps, had gotten in the habit of sleeping in the cubbyhole, which was strictly against regulations. I'd reprimanded him twice. A third reprimand would cause a mandatory court-martial for conduct unbecoming an officer. Springer was one of the few officers in the galaxy who could work the statdot system of electronic regulatory impulses converted into rhythmic beeps (a discordant beep indicated that such and such a phase was malfunctioning). The statdot system was not going to replace visual equipment operation, but it would probably become standard as a supplement to visuals. Springer "had a good ear,"

as various techs often expressed it.

Some of the wrenches opened the hatch in the rear of the demon — as noisily as possible — and we all saw Springer as the hatch swung open. He lay on his side, facing away from us, the statdot helmet console covering his head, and he appeared asleep, judging from his body position, but I couldn't be certain, since we couldn't see his face.

Everyone turned to look in my direction, fidgeting nervously. They all knew Springer was asleep, and they were all waiting for me to have him awakened. Sleeping in a working area with other officers and enlisted men around would automatically warrant another reprimand, and the third reprimand would compel the court-martial I'd been trying to avoid. Springer was a good officer — just a little sloppy and careless and unprofessional in some areas.

"If he's so busy studying the statdot system, let's not bother him. Close the hatch and let him work."

The wrenches quickly closed the hatch, and I returned to my office with Lieutenant Bentley close at my heels. In my office again I waved for Bentley to sit by the desk, and I sat in my chair again, thumbing through her file.

"You said before that you don't like what's going on here?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is going on here? In your opinion?"

Judging from Lieutenant Bentley's expression, it appeared she might be wishing her transfer had been effective about an hour ago.

"One of the officers in the indoctrination program told us this expeditionary base is building an ancient god of a tribe of natives —"

"Wrong. We're constructing a replica of a *demon*, not a *god*. Which officer used the word *god* instead of *demon*?"

"I don't remember his name, sir. I —"

"That's all right. I'll learn his name some other way, and we'll set him straight. Do you know the difference between a *god* and a *demon*?"

"I think so, sir."

"One of the dictionary definitions of *god* is . . . any of various beings conceived of as supernatural, immortal, and having special powers over the lives and affairs of people. A *god* is honored and admired. One of the definitions of *demon* is . . . devil, evil spirit. What do you know about the Halkorian tribes?"

"Only that they're humanoid, very much like the human race . . . and they're nomadic, primitive."

"That's all you know?"

"Yes, sir."

"The Halkorians on this continent of their world are divided into two main groups: the northern tribes and the southern tribes. The northern tribes are warlike, city-builders and city-dwellers but still explorers; they have a history of preying upon others for slaves. The southern tribes are

nomadic and isolationist. They're also explorers, but, unlike their northern enemies, they are experts in surviving in adverse climates. They know how to survive in the deserts, in the mountains, in the jungles, in the snow and ice regions. The southern Halkorians avoid the northern tribes whenever possible. When the northerners capture them, they kill the old men and women and take the young for slaves. The southern Halkorians avoid war at all costs; they even avoid *contact* whenever possible. They worship various gods but also worship some demons. One of the demons they worship is their demon of war, *Tharnat*. *Tharnat* is the one we've constructed a replica of. The largest southern tribe has been trapped by a group of northern tribes. We had to come up with a way to prevent a massacre, since the southern tribes have few weapons . . . nothing to compare with their northern enemies. They would be capable of fighting, but they never fight to win a war. Their few soldiers fight a rear guard action as the main body retreats and runs from conflicts. They —"

The intercom buzzed softly. I pushed the acceptance button.

"Sir, some members of the staff were wondering if you would like to join them in watching the monitors set up in the reception area. They should start broadcasting in about five minutes."

"I'll be out to watch. Thank you."

"Shall I come too?" Lieutenant Bentley asked.

"Yes. This is a show you won't want to miss."

The staff had set up rows of seats between three large screens, so the event, projected from central points, had a panoramic stereophonic effect. I sat in the front row with Walters on my left and Bentley on my right. The scene that unfolded before our eyes was awe-inspiring by any standard. The majestic Dark Mist Mountains towered in the background, higher than the Himalayas on Earth, so high their peaks disappeared in the clouds. In the foreground we saw a hundred nude young women and a hundred nude young men motionless on marble sacrificial slabs while priests stood near each sacrifice, sunlight gleaming on upraised ceremonial knives. A throng of thousands of native spectators waited patiently. The music from instruments within the crowd of Halkorian spectators was beautiful in its own way — but eerie, plaintive . . .

"The Halkorians sacrifice their young to appease their war demon, *Tharnat*. They have a mass sacrifice whenever danger is imminent."

Bentley was staring at the screen. "They kill their own people instead of fighting back?"

"Incredible, isn't it? It's their belief that appeasing the flying demon of war will cause him to deliver them from an impending attack . . . if *Tharnat* is in a good mood. *If* is a key word in their beliefs. Sometimes they avoid conflict with the northern tribes, sometimes they don't. When they can't avoid a conflict, they not only sacrifice some of their young people, they're also slaughtered and enslaved by the enemy. And they rationalize the occa-

sional failure of a mass sacrifice by saying that Tharnat was not appeased because he happened to be in a bad mood."

I was about to explain more to our new lieutenant, but at that moment the replica of Tharnat flew upon the scene, landing a short distance from the rows of sacrificial slabs.

The priests and thousands of native spectators were paralyzed by the sight of their war demon materializing before their very eyes. They must have been frozen with shock and awe. We, the staff of United Worlds Expeditionary Force Number Fifty-Five, were frozen for a different reason, watching intently the end result of our efforts. I kept hoping nothing would go wrong. If the antigrav system malfunctioned, Tharnat could literally fall flat on his face before all those thousands of natives. If the speaker systems didn't work properly, our Tharnat replica wouldn't be able to communicate. And there were dozens of other things that could go wrong to cause our artificial demon to fail in its mission. . . .

During the planning of a thing such as this, you wonder if the final effect will be as good as you have visualized it. In this case, the end result was even better than I had imagined. It was magnificent, beyond my expectations. Tharnat flew onto the scene smoothly and effortlessly. Settled on the ground near the would-be sacrifices, he towered above the natives, breathing flames, with a mist of smoke around his legs and lower portion. One layer of 333 eyes glared at the natives, and his voice was thunderous. After each sentence in the Halkorian language, we were given a brief translation in English over the mikes in the reception area.

"Tharnat demands that you stop this sacrifice! Tharnat is not pleased. You must fight your enemies rather than run from them!"

There was more dialogue from our recreation of the flying demon, Tharnat, but I found myself paying primary attention to the priests and thousands of spectators.

Their *response* was the crucial factor.

If for some reason they did not *believe* they were seeing their war demon, Tharnat . . .

If they did not react in the way we had hoped and planned . . .

During the silence that followed, I could feel the tension in the room. The southern Halkorians were frozen, still staring at the creature before them.

Motionless.

Frozen with shock.

And disbelief?

The second layer of eyes glowered at the Halkorians.

The tension in our reception area grew as the silence extended. I saw some of the officers lean forward. Faces were tense, expectant; some were pale with anticipation. We were army personnel from another planet, and the Halkorians were alien, but we were all *human* despite the light-years that separated our galaxies. We had that unmistakable bond of humanity, and if

our operation failed, the priests and spectators would rebuff our replica, slaughter the sacrifices, and run from their enemies as they had been doing for centuries.

The third layer of eyes began glowing, and it gave the impression that Tharnat was losing his patience.

Then, as if at a silent signal, the priests bowed simultaneously.

"Throw away your sacrificial knives!" Tharnat boomed. *"You must make weapons to defend yourselves! You must fight to defend your people!"*

The thousandth eye began glowing.

A tension-filled silence followed.

I thought, *They're not buying it!*

Suddenly, a majority of the priests chanted, *"We will obey, Tharnat. We will obey."* A massed murmur arose from the throng of thousands of spectators that had bowed. At first the sound was indecipherable, but then the translation came over the speakers in the reception area — the thousands of natives were saying they would obey.

The tension in the room still seemed as tight as an iron band.

The voices of the Halkorians rose louder and louder —

And then, murmuring beneath its breath, Tharnat made a strange sound picked up by a localized microphone and broadcast to us —

Dum de-dum, da, da, dah!

The sound went on and on, an electronic musical chant of victory, the same chant as programmed into numerous video games as a reward for perfect scores during challenge stages, a sound that said in electronic music, *Perfect! Congratulations!*

As several realizations struck me simultaneously — the Halkorians would not hear the subdued musical chant, and even if a few of the closest *did* hear, they would not know the significance — I knew Springer had installed the congratulatory chant, programmed it to be played if everything went right. Someone laughed, others laughed with relief as they recognized the musical ditty, and all tension melted away.

I glanced at Bentley. Her face had been pale, tight. Now she was relaxed, smiling, laughing.

We returned to my office. I sat behind my desk, but Bentley did not sit.

"May I withdraw the request for transfer, sir?"

"Certainly. I'll tear it up so it doesn't go on your record."

"Thank you, sir." She saluted and seemed about to say something else but then paused as if she did not know how to express the thoughts running through her mind. By our more advanced technology we had just prevented the southern Halkorians from needlessly sacrificing two hundred of their young men and women. We had manipulated them into defending themselves, and now we had the business of either preventing the war or making it as short as possible. Experience on a thousand worlds had proven that, while alien nations and races struggled for dominance much in the way that

humans did, peace came only through a sense of equality. Now we would have to work to establish that equality among the tribes of Halkorians.

An hour or so later I sent for Springer and told him that I was going to recommend that he be promoted to captain.

"Thank you, sir." He frowned. Easy to see he had expected a court-martial more than a promotion. Although Springer had been decorated for bravery on several battlefields, he had not been the best of what we sometimes called rear-echelon officers (but I did expect he would improve with time). "Because of my work on Tharnat?"

"Partly," I answered. And, after Springer left, as I signed a series of documents and daily reports, I thought:

And partly for reminding us that even flying demons have feet of clay.



WHEN WE MUST PART

Twin moons come up, a cold wind blows,
we gulp caffeine at fireside,
consult the maps, and then decide;
Which one will stay, and which one goes?

We have, in just five hundred days,
explored this world: we were the first!
But then the fuel reserve tank burst . . .
Which one goes, and which one stays?

It's like divorce now, I suppose,
one gets the crawler and the dome,
one gets the orbiter, and home —
Which one will stay, and which one goes?

We need not both be castaways;
yet wished I could go on with you
here where the sky is violet-blue,
across plateaus, through sandstorm haze,
beneath the unforgiving blaze
(the distant stars', the Milky Way's)
before this terrible choice arose —
Which one goes, and which one stays?

— Jonathan V. Post

When We Must Part 59

A SOUL AT HEAVEN'S GATE
by R. Garcia y Robertson
art: John Lakey





This story, "A Soul at Heaven's Gate," is a sequel to "The Flying Mountain," which appeared in our May 1987 issue.

The author informs us that these two stories, as well as a couple of others, all form part of a novel he is composing. And when not writing his novel, the author travels to Hollywood, where he attempts to sell his story lines to representatives of the movie industry.

I stood in the snow, wetting my dragon leather boots, and watching Allah draw a white damask curtain across the sights and sounds of late afternoon.

A drunken voice called through the caravansary door, "Come out of the cold, Chinese bitch; come fill the cup, and keep us warm."

His fellow Kafirs thought him funny. This high country caravansary was a filthy hole in the storm, filled to overflowing with unlicensed thieves, unwashed yogis, and inexpensive thugs. Though when you are on the run, any hole seems homey.

Outside, a spring storm whirled over the Roof of the World. Snow blanketed the caravansary's courtyards, banked high against the dry stone walls, and burdened the gray slate roof with its white weight. Beyond the walled courts, yaks stood in stoic black circles, noses pressed pathetically together, tails to the wind. Only the surrounding mountain ring showed above the storm, a stone sea of white-capped peaks, heaving from horizon to horizon.

When I was sure that stone and snow walled us off from the world, I left the bitter wind for the stifling heat of the caravansary commons room. Open fires smoked at either end of this narrow stone space, blackening the walls and roof with soot. Camels knelt along the far wall, ponies shivered by the door, and human beasts of burden lay beside huge baskets of rock salt. Stale sweat, roasting meat, fresh dung, forbidden wine, dreamy sweet opium smoke — the dark air was so rich and ripe that a deep breath threatened to throttle you.

Two Tibetan salesmen sat, debating cures for dysentery; one proclaimed the virtues of unicorn's urine, the other favored dirt washed from the toes of a saint's statue. A knot of Kafir camel drivers, wearing dirty sheepskins and wild whiskers, waved a wineskin and begged me to join them. The heathens hereabouts had been much addicted to wine and fornication until an energetic caliph bent them to the will of Allah, whereupon they took several wives each and went on drinking.

I told the drunkards that they must make do with small boys and she-camels because I wasn't in the mood. Being the only woman in the commons room, I was in some demand, if only as a novelty.

Finding a seat in the straw alongside an aged Afghan, I thrust my boots up against the cool flames of a dung fire, turning them slowly to toast my toes evenly. "You say you saw Naymans in the northern passes?"

The old Afghan's answer was a fair imitation of a camel breaking wind.

His mouth was too full for more. All his attention was fixed on stripping hot bits of blackened mutton off a thin iron spit and popping them into his mouth. He paused only to wipe grease on his hide leggings and take bites from a withered brown onion.

Finishing one spit, the Afghan drew a second from the fire. For a moment his mouth had room for words. "*Han, han*, my lady. Naymans, half a day north of here."

"How many?"

"More than I could count. When the snow lifts, they will come through the passes, then my lady may count them herself."

A horrible thought. "How do you know those fiends are headed here?"

"Not even a fiend would camp in the snow at the foot of those passes, except to come here."

"They might have moved since you saw them?"

"My lady, if they had moved, they would be here, but they are not here, so they have not moved."

To him I was a lady. Banished by Mohammed of Ghor for some forgotten felony or bungled blood feud, this Afghan passed his nights in caves and crevices, living on wild yak and melted snow — any roof overhead was a palace, anyone who bought him mutton was a lord or lady. The Naymans would find him too poor to rob, too old to rape, and no sport to kill. I was not so fortunate.

Naymans are dogs that feed on human flesh. Part pagan and part Christian, they combine an utter contempt for life with a pious conviction that all the world's woes are due to women. This particular pack had been sent by the Gur-Khan of Black Cathay to fetch me to Balasaghun. The Naymans would work their reward out of me on the way.

Thanking the Afghan for his dismal news, I left him filling the void at the center of his small universe. Ignoring more obscene offers from the camel drivers, I made my way to where a monk and boy were waiting.

The largest and loudest of the drinkers tottered to his feet, staggering after me. This Kafir was only half the size of a house, but looked as if he had lost his share of arguments. Behind a blue dyed beard, he had a crumpled face, ruined nose, and a mouth full of broken teeth.

A drunken lunge caught my coat. Heavy fingers held me fast till his eyes fell on the boy kneeling by the monk. The Kafir found himself looking down at death.

Iron armor bound the boy's chest, a horn-backed bow and hand-carved quiver lay beside him. This was the son of a Kiyat Mongol subchief, whose father had left him nothing but the name Ironsmith, and even that had been taken from a defeated Tartar. He had the flat basic face of a Gobi nomad, but his hair was streaked with red, and his eyes were as green and wild as spring steppe grass.

I pulled the Kafir's fingers from my quilted jacket. "If the boy bothers to

nock an arrow, several men might be maimed before calm can be restored."

The big Kafir sobered, then stumbled back to his wineskin, muttering curses upon women who tempted men into trouble.

An accumulation of calamities had brought me and this boy together. My husband was an amir, too pious to pay taxes to a Buddhist Gur-Khan. My Lord the Amir had taken me on a senseless chase after a Chinese sorcerer named Lee Ko. An awful waste of time, but my Lord wished to put the sorcerer in the service of Allah. Like many successful middle-aged men, my Lord had begun to worry about how much he had done for himself, and how little he had done for Heaven.

We found Lee Ko amid a pack of Kipchaks, just as a horde of Black Cathayan cavalry arrived. In the massacre that followed, I misplaced my husband. The Ironsmith had been one of Lee Ko's bodyguards, and we were forced to flee together, hounded by cavalry into the hills that feed the Amu Dar'ya. The Amu is one of the rivers that waters Paradise, but our escape was a hellish mixture of long marches, dirty water, flooding rains, and hailstones the size of pigeons' eggs. Now, we were cornered with our backs to the wild highlands that ring the Roof of the World.

Beside the boy sat Brahmaputra, a blind monk from deep within these mountains, as ancient as the boy was young. His poise and manner were high caste, but a hermit's hard life had worn him into a walking skeleton. Thin, twisted flesh kept his holy bones folded into a full lotus, and snow-white eyes stared off into the infinite. Only a begging bowl lay between him and starvation.

Side by side the boy and monk made an odd pair. You might search these mountains from Black Cathay to Kubal, and not find two more mismatched males. Yet ever since the monk had come to the caravansary, trailing behind a tea caravan, the Mongol had been determined to see what he was made of.

I broke my bad news at once. "Naymans are in the northern passes; they can be here in less than a day. There is bound to be at least a troop of Black Cathayan cavalry coming up behind, as the Gur-Khan would never let his wolves wander this far south without an escort."

Brahmaputra stroked his wispy beard. "Whatever can they want in these wilds, and in this weather?"

"What they want is me." Despite the dung fires and animal heat, sweat collected cold along my spine. "My Lord and husband is the Amir of Black Spring Citadel. Last spring his High Ugliness the Gur-Khan sent tax collectors; my husband stripped them, whipped them, and sold them to the Ghuzz. In Black Cathay tax evasion is a serious crime, for which the Gur-Khan favors hand-chopping, crucifixion, and other forms of vigorous justice. Besides, the Gur-Khan had to buy his envoys back from the tasteless Ghuzz, who drove a humiliating bargain."

The Ironsmith chuckled; being both a boy, and a barbarian, he delighted in disaster. I sneered to him in Turkic, "You they will spear just to be tidy.

No one likes a crafty nomad."

His curved lids and broad smile narrowed. "Willow Moon, I have been hunted by experts."

Willow Moon is not my real name. It was placed on me by the slave dealer who took me from my home in China and sold me in Black Cathay. He hoped to advertise my long limbs and oval face. The name no longer hurts, but I would die before being a slave in Balasaghun again.

The Ironsmith's boast was boyish bravado. There was blood between Mongols and Naymans, and he had as much reason to fear them as I did. Even more, if you rate death as worse than rape and slavery.

Brahmaputra began to pour holy oil on our troubles. "I feel we are becoming lost in fear and anger. Set them aside; they chain one to the flesh, separate one from the universe." He had an unnerving habit of speaking through me, as if the empty air were a safer audience than a woman.

"Safe enough for you to say, as even Naymans will find no fun in harming such a holy fool."

His voice took no notice of my ignorance. "Naymans or no Naymans, I will walk my way to Heaven's Gate."

"Why walk? The Naymans will gladly send you to Heaven, faster than your feet ever could."

Each bit of wit had to be translated from Persian to Turkic for the boy's benefit. Brahmaputra waited, then went on. "Heaven's Gate is a most holy monastery among the Wolf's Teeth Mountains." He mentioned the monastery's more inviting features: reflective rock gardens, tranquil pools, silent stone gate, silver bells calling the monks to prayer.

All this I turned into Turkic, but a boy born to savagery and sour mare's milk would find such peace to be boredom incarnate. The Ironsmith was still studying the camel drivers, wondering if they were better off dead. With a nod to us he asked, "How can a bountiful valley survive amid this barrenness? What defenses does it have?"

Thoughtful people find such questions upsetting coming from a murderous nomad. The Gur-Khan was just such a sensitive soul, which was why he wanted to see the Ironsmith's shrewd head separated from its shoulders.

But Brahmaputra was determined to shower wisdom over the boy. "Heaven's Gate is ringed by barren peaks. Its flowers and fruit trees spring from streams of liquid ice. Life comes from death. How could it be otherwise?" Monks and mullahs are masters at making mysteries out of everyday matters.

"The monks of Heaven's Gate would never harm a soul. The spirits of storm and mountain, the souls of beasts — these are what stand between Heaven's Gate and harm."

As I translated, the Ironsmith laughed at phantom defenders. "Souls and spirits may stop the local bandits, who seem a spiritless lot, but with enough reward Mongols would ride twice through Hell."

Brahmaputra's voice became both admonishing and seductive. "Don't think that Heaven's Gate is to be gained for free. It lies beyond the material world. Four barriers bar the way: one is warm, one is cold, the first is living, the last is stone. To reach it, we must cast out all desire, even the desire to be there. We must ignore the needs of the flesh and approach with aimless spirits. The Naymans may be easier to please. They are only simple souls, delighting in pain and death; their demands touch only on the body."

A skin-and-bones monk may care nothing for his body, but I had grown too fond of mine to trust it to a Nayman.

Brahmaputra lectured on. "This world that seems so solid is the husk that hides the inner truth. It must be sloughed off, just as the living soul carries each carcass a scant distance, then drops it by the wayside."

A camel shuddered and snorted. She was disturbed to find her master fumbling with a herd boy. Camels take offense at the strangest things.

I wondered how Brahmaputra could remain so otherworldly when each breath reminded us of every bodily function enjoyed by men and beasts. Thank Allah that I am a woman, and spared the attention of pious infidels. I do not mean to slight infidel theology, but I have more healthy ways to relax my brain, like pounding my head with a rock.

The Ironsmith waved at the illusionary world. "The solid world is everywhere, and souls and spirits are seldom seen."

Brahmaputra laughed, putting his fist into the flames of the dung fire. "Being blind, my vision is not obscured by sight. See how fire burns the body, but not the soul? Burn the body of a Buddha, and the soul of a saint will shine like a star."

Fire flickered over his fingers, but Brahmaputra's fist did not waver. The boy's green eyes searched for the slightest sign of pain. Mongols have a very male fascination with mortification. In their land beyond the Gobi, the north wind lashes arid steppe and subalpine forest. They think themselves the hardest people on earth; toughness in others is always upsetting. "But where will I find a Buddha to burn?"

Brahmaputra withdrew his fist from the fire, ruby red but seemingly unhurt. "You carry one with you always."

The monk fell into a fit of meditation, leaving the Mongol and I to talk over our troubles. Neither of us had been headed for Heaven's Gate, but I would have walked barefoot over the Roof of the World before letting a Nayman feed on me. However, none of this talk could become action till the storm lifted; snow had halted hunters and hunted in their tracks.

Evening arrived. The boy brushed off a final offer from the Kafirs to buy me, or at least rent me for the night, and we settled down to sleep. The boy had a beast's tight grip on the present. He ran a hand along my hip then rolled over, saying, "Willow Moon, tomorrow will bring either good or ill, so both are better faced fully rested."

Sleep had more trouble finding me. Our bed was a windowless stone cell,

which had seen recent service as a sheep pen. Every sort of lizard and scorpion snuggled up to us for warmth. I lay half the night, awake and alone, feeling the boy's hard body filling the space beside me.

By midmorning the snow had subsided. Were it not for the Naymans, I would have thought it a wonder just to be outside, enjoying the world scrubbed clean by the storm. Allah had raised wet air from the fevered Indian jungles and scattered it white and frozen over the Roof of the World. Little snow spiders scurried about, searching for frozen insects that had died half a world away.

Hundreds of yaks and a few wretched horses blackened the snow. Breakfast fires filled the air with sweet burning juniper bush while women sat on markhor skins, ladling yogurt into wooden bowls — after first flinging spoonfuls to the four sacred winds. Their men loaded the animals with brick tea for a far-off mountain monastery. As I offered up a late-morning prayer, they stuck out their tongues and grunted greetings. The overloaded horses said nothing, standing gaunt and ragged, chewing on each other's tails.

Such were the signs of civilization.

We broke our fast on *tsamba*, a local delight of toasted flour held together with weak tea and rancid yak butter. To make it bearable, I mixed in boiled meat and mustard greens. The Ironsmith bolted this gruel with the grace of a starving jackal. Brahmaputra showed more breeding, testing each morsel with his tongue and setting the meat aside. This rejected flesh was snapped up by a dirty-yellow camp dog.

All about us, granite wedges reared up between dazzling glaciers, blending into steel skies. I could smell more snow in the air and pointed to where our ponies whimpered in the wind. "The passes into Heaven's Gate are bound to be high above the snowline. Our lowland ponies can't live on dried yak meat like the local ones do."

The boy grunted and glanced toward the northern passes, white and empty in the morning light. "We'll trade them for better beasts — yaks perhaps. I mislike being on foot, but I mislike Naymans even more. Willow Moon, spoon me some more *tsamba*, then go find the Afghan. I want him to guide us to Heaven's Gate."

I told him that if he couldn't spoon his own *tsamba*, he could never be Khan of All the Mongols, then left to get the Afghan. This seasoned hunter was surveying the snowfields from atop a bit of broken wall that had fallen under the caravansary eaves. Lying in a dirty heap, he blended well with the rocks beneath him. From the gray salted through his beard, I guessed he was near to fifty, though his odor was older than the Prophet. His habit of going summer and winter wrapped in rotting hides had added years to his aroma.

In blunt contrast to Brahmaputra, the Afghan spoke a clipped version of Persian, mixed with animal noises. It was informative rather than enlightening. He had heard of Heaven's Gate. "A monastery in a warm valley, amid the Wolf's Teeth peaks. Guarded by spirits. Beyond the chain of water above

Devil's Lake." With hardly any words, he had managed to make the trip as inviting as a bed of sharp stones at the bottom of a dark chasm.

Gathering his few things — yak skins, fire flints, and hunting bow — the Afghan agreed to guide us at least to Devil's Lake.

When I returned, the Ironsmith was busy bullying food and transport from Madame Ula, the matriarch who ran the caravansary. Madame Ula was a heathen woman who wore wide embroidered dresses over her broad frame and beaten silver disks in her raven hair. Her people were pure Kafir, from far over the mountains. Having never bowed to Allah, nor any man on earth, Madame Ula had two husbands. They were brothers named Changpa Tsing and Changpa Lama; finding Madame Ula as fertile as her flocks, they had taken respectful turns siring a horde of sons and daughters.

She was loath to trade sturdy yaks and fat sheep for a pair of lowland ponies that were unlikely to survive the week, much less the winter. However, none of her tribe were ready killers, while the young Mongol had his bow and a boy's indifference to death. Madame Ula saw the argument coming and warned her menfolk away. They scurried off to look for long lost sheep or to check the antelope traps. Then she faced the Ironsmith alone, holding her most prized possession, a little silver prayer wheel. Each turn of the wheel sent a supplication up to her heathen heaven. During the course of their conversation, she must have dispatched a thousand prayers.

Having survived many seasons in harsh surroundings, she had sense enough to make only the objections that her rank and station demanded. The boy came away with three yaks and a dozen fat-tailed sheep that could be cooked in their own grease.

He shook his head. "This is no more than we need, but if my mother had not taught me to respect older women, I would have beaten her into a more reasonable frame of mind."

As I bid good-bye to our ponies, they begged me to stay. You can learn much from beasts that might otherwise be lost, and listening comes easy to me. In my husband's harem I added Persian, Turkic, and a smattering of Arabic to my native Chinese. As a lonely girl growing up in the shadow of the Great Wall, I listened to animals. The horses whimpered that these mountains had been a trial. Their uneasy glances said that what lay ahead could only be worse, but these dumb brutes knew nothing of Naymans.

The trail southward skirted the edge of a giant glacier. An icy tidal wave with a mile-wide brim of boulders that would someday creep forward and grind the caravansary back into clay. As we climbed past this frozen flood, a string of black dots poured out of the pass to the north, dribbling down into the far side of the valley. So many men on horses had to be soldiers and thieves. The race to Heaven's Gate was under way.

All that day we toiled upward, with the yellow camp dog trotting behind us, hoping for more handouts. Rotting banners and broken prayer tablets protruded from the snow, proclaiming that we were on the pilgrim's path.

With a steppe nomad's eye for forage, the Ironsmith rested us only when he saw good grazing. This made for very few stops. I had not seen a real tree since leaving the lowlands; now, even the bushes became rare. Our sheep marched with forage lashed to their backs. When we slaughtered an animal, the load it had borne would be used to fatten the survivors. A crudely efficient system, and like many efficient systems, manifestly unfair. Though sheep will put up with that sort of thing.

We passed nomad camps where unveiled women in full red skirts cooked round great communal pots and cheerful children herded evil-eyed goats. Their black felt tents were trimmed with tiny bells, each bell hung with hawk feathers to keep them swinging and ringing in the thin wind.

Between where I was born in China and the mountains that border the Roof of the World, there are wide rivers, dry deserts, and endless steppe. At one time or another, I had walked most of this distance, so my feet soon found the rhythm. Walking did not come near so naturally to Mongols, who go straight from their mother's arms into the saddle. I asked the Ironsmith how he liked the hike.

Without taking his eyes off the trail, he replied, "When I was twelve winters, I spent nine days without food, climbing the black slopes of Mount Terguene because my cousins hunted me. When my cousins caught me, they kept me yoked like an animal, living on wash water and kitchen slop. I escaped by swimming the River Onon with the heavy yoke still fixed about my neck."

This short discourse on family fun among the Mongols meant that he did not mind the climb.

When twilight settled over the trail, neither of us were tired. The knowledge that the Naymans were on horseback kept us fresh. The Afghan had long since gone on ahead. Darkness and daylight were as one to Brahmaputra.

By midnight we were over the first pass, facing a descent too dangerous to do in darkness. With yak dung and brushwood we built a fire, just beyond the saddle beneath a great reef of stars. We could see the Nayman's fires far below us. No doubt they had been delayed by the need to extort money from Madame Ula and to tax thoroughly the camel drivers and tea caravan. We were set to sacrifice our first sheep when the Afghan found our fire. An unblemished young ibex was slung over his shoulder. He had run the animal into a deep snowdrift and caught it bare-handed. Our lucky sheep was spared for another day of marching.

At dawn we descended the south slope of the pass. Sunlight poured through the thin air, the snowfields shrank, and we saw the raw bones of Mother Earth mixed with meager meadows. These sparse pastures were sprinkled with small spring blossoms and hovels heaped from loose stones, the summer homes of shepherds. Despite such signs of life, no animals were headed our way. Wild asses and marmots scampered the other way, giving

us curious glances and making sounds much like laughter.

Toward evening we saw a lone pilgrim well ahead of us on the sacred way. We overtook him quickly, for he was moving in fits and making little progress. Every few steps he would throw himself prone on the path, scramble to his feet, and then fling himself down again. We hailed him, but he kept a holy silence.

His rising and falling cast a hypnotic spell. Instead of kicking the traveler to his feet and demanding an explanation, the Ironsmith had me describe the scene to Brahmaputra. Then in hushed tones, the boy asked for the monk's opinion.

For once Brahmaputra seemed loath to speak. After a long silence he answered, "Here is a man at one with his journey. He prostrates himself so he may measure the holy path to Heaven's Gate with his own body. Every inch of his pilgrimage will have true meaning."

Despite his blindness, Brahmaputra was tempted to fall into a frenzy of humility alongside this human inchworm.

The Mongol loosened his scimitar, still watching the pilgrim heave himself into the dirt. "If we burned his body, would we see the soul of a saint?"

Brahmaputra resumed his usual air of expertise. "What is the condition of his coat?"

"Shredded almost to the undershirt," I said.

"Then he has been at it less than a year. You won't find sainthood till there's blood on the trail."

The trail rose again, abandoning the grazing ground of gazelle for the haunts of big-horned nayan and chiru antelope. As the trail slithered upward, it shrank into a sandy viper, twisting between boulders bigger than mosques and fearsome gorges carved by thin trickles of yellow water. We had no trouble keeping ahead of the hunters. Several sheep vanished where the trail turned into loose vertical shale, and I was sure the Nayman ponies suffered even more.

It was well after dark when we came to Devil's Lake, and we pitched our tents on a bare and ghostly ground. The lakeshore lay dead white in the waning moonlight, and crunched like snow underfoot, though the night was mild and far from freezing. The lake itself was a twisted shimmering scimitar, lying point toward us.

First light woke me instantly, without memory of dreaming nor falling asleep. In the light darkness before dawn, Brahmaputra was already mumbling his morning meditations. My dawn prayer, *La illaha il Allah*, mixed with his *Om mani padme hum* — "There is no god but God" and "The Jewel is in the Lotus." Which showed the idiocy of the infidel, for Allah was always with the faithful, but nothing beneath these bleak peaks resembled a lotus.

Ground that had seemed snow-white by moonlight was shown by the sun to be solid salt. During the dry winter months, Devil's Lake had sunk to half

its size, and the wet monsoon had yet to refill it. Only a few inches deep, the water had a lethal pristine clarity, pale green at the edges shading to deep marine-blue in the middle. Whatever the water touched turned white with salt, and the brine merely mocked your thirst. Certainly, it was the work of some diligent devil.

On this salt shore we had our first falling out. The old Afghan said he had led us far enough, and set about collecting his few things. The Ironsmith drew his scimitar, informing the hunter that his services were still wanted. I tried to soften the argument in translation, but the issue was dangerously clear, and both man and boy were blunt with words and ready with blows.

With death inches away, the stubborn old hunter hefted his bow. That was a futile gesture, for the range was too short for arrows and the scimitar could whittle the bow to splinters. The poor fellow was backed against one limit of his world. Neither he nor the animals he hunted passed beyond Devil's Lake. He could not go on, any more than he could bathe and set up a scent shop in Samarkand.

The boy was bent on answering the Afghan's arguments with blows when Brahmaputra caught the essence of the dispute. "Forgive this simple soul. He was a wolf in his last life. Though reborn a man, he still clings to his lone wolf ways."

I translated, as sea-fire smoldered in the Ironsmith's eyes. He made a sharp negative motion with his hand, aimed at compelling the Afghan to comply in silence. Salt crunched underfoot as he shifted into fighting stance.

Brahmaputra may have been blind, but he was not to be fooled. Rising to his feet, he tracked the boy across the crunching salt. "You have a wolf in your soul as well. If you must release its rage, meet me instead."

Again the hand hacked down. The boy respected Brahmaputra, but he was bent on having his way.

"If you cannot beat me," murmured the monk, "how can you hope to defeat him?"

"I do not need to beat a blind man." The Mongol was only stating simple fact. His people have the chivalry of hyenas.

"Your needs will always defeat you. If you won't fight, let us put strength and resistance to the test. If you can push me farther than I push you, feel free to fight the Afghan."

The boy hesitated, then consented. Though his broad face was blank, I could read the Ironsmith as easily as any animal on the trail; his first ancestors were the Blue-Gray Wolf and the Tawny Doe. Half of him thought the contest silly; the other half looked for the trick behind the monk's thin arms and narrow hips.

Brahmaputra had himself and the boy stand at arm's length, with feet wide to the side. Each grasped the other's hands. "I will push first," said Brahmaputra, "brace yourself."

Standing stiff, the legs to the side, the Mongol found that he could not keep the monk from rocking him back a step.

"Now, it is your turn."

The Ironsmith put all his thick young body into the effort, but Brahmaputra let his arms go limp. Meeting no resistance, the boy got no leverage. The monk's feet remained firm. A fakir's trick which I had seen before, but the boy hadn't.

"A trick."

"A lesson. Surrender is always stronger than resistance."

"It was no true test of strength." Now his anger was fixed on the monk.

"If you think that, then throw me to the ground in any manner that pleases you."

I translated, and with the hesitation of a hungry panther, the Mongol seized the monk's shoulders. Brahmaputra's body turned with the attack. His arms swept up and out, breaking the hold and helping the boy fly head over heels into the salt.

"The principle behind both cases is the same." Brahmaputra's breath came easy, despite the thin air and mild exercise. "Forceful action defeats itself."

Short as the lesson and lecture were, they afforded the yak hunter ample time to depart. Having seen his share of kills go free, he knew when and how to use his heels.

Brushing salt off his body, the boy acted as if the issue had vanished with the Afghan. He seldom took offense, only revenge.

As we left Devil's Lake, a huge silence settled over everything. The pack yaks turned big mournful eyes back on the trail, and the bleats of the sheep grew more restive. Dumb domestic brutes didn't mind being eaten one by one, but they feared intruding into forbidden lands.

There were no more wild beasts by the trail side, only birds on the wing — swallows, magpies, and snow-white vultures. These birds showed no fear of us; some small ones even stopped to take food from my hand. But before the grains were gone, one bird would warn the others that this wasn't a place to tarry. Then they would be off, leaving me staring at the remaining barley and pondering their flight.

Though I passed the bird's warning on to the Ironsmith, he was too busy eyeing Brahmaputra with renewed respect. The boy merely had me ask the monk, "How long before I could fight like that?"

"The principles behind those movements are simple and require only a lifetime to grasp."

The boy was not put off by Brahmaputra's boundless modesty. "But I would apply myself ceaselessly."

"Then it would require at least two lifetimes."

"And if I put all my energy into it?"

"Many lifetimes," replied the monk.

Wisdom is more enlightening than encouraging.

Above Devil's Lake was a chain of smaller freshwater lakes, filling a series of sheer-walled valleys — a silver necklace threaded together by steep stream beds. Bronze bells on our pack yaks rang back and forth between the narrow mountain walls, their melody echoing over still water and ice. Climbing this line of lakes took days. Frowning cliffs forced us out onto the ice. The lower lakes were only half-frozen, and we inched over thin sheets that buckled and sang beneath our weight. Their transparent surfaces glistened like glass, fishes darted beneath our feet, and I could count the pebbles on the lake bottom. Higher up the ice was stronger, though it remained as slick as ever. The stream beds became crystal rapids, solid but still treacherous.

At the last of the lakes, Brahmaputra grew agitated. He propped himself up on the shore, muttering *Om mani padme hum* as though the frozen lake were floating in lotus. The Ironsmith had me break his trance, and the monk explained. "This is the last lake, the Sacred Lake at Heaven's Gate. Drink of it, and be spared a hundred rebirths. Bathe in it, and emerge without sin."

The ice was too thick for bathing or drinking, so we were not saved from the tedium of a hundred sinful lives. Still somewhat in awe of Brahmaputra, the boy ordered us to camp by the lakeshore, though the sacred ground was buried in snow, offering neither forage nor fuel. We tramped down small patches of snow, then covered these packed places with hides and pitched our shelters atop them. The Mongol climbed a sandstone spire and watched for Naymans till night fell.

When the Ironsmith descended from his perch, he said he had seen campfires on the far shore of the lake behind us. Without wood enough for a watch fire, the boy staked Brahmaputra's mongrel beside the sheep. This poor beast had come the whole distance on stolen scraps and the meat the monk rejected. The animal whined and pleaded at being left alone, but the boy had a wolf's distaste for dogs. This was a weak watchdog, but now the nights were too cold for standing fireless watches. We would just as soon be murdered in our warm beds.

The Ironsmith and I wrapped ourselves into a single sleeping robe, piling the extra one on top. Face to face we dined on dried meat taken from under the pack saddles. Constant rubbing against the backs of the yaks kept the meat warm and pliable. Not quite The Traveler's Table in Tashkent, but the fleshpots of the Stone City were far away, and the day's hike had left us hungry.

Though our faces were only inches apart, we could see nothing but the black masses of mountains blotting out the stars. Twice, I heard the watchdog complaining in the cold and dark. Then with a final fearful yelp he gave in to the stillness. We were warm, full, and almost comfortable. The boy's thoughts went beyond his belly, and his hands wandered over my body. Soon we had bits of clothing off, and warm patches of familiar skin pressed

together. Suddenly, he cursed like a mullah caught with a skin of wine and a Christian concubine. Pushing me aside, he leaped up and disappeared into the night.

Puzzled and lonely, I felt the full weight of the day's weariness. Curling into the warmth where the boy's body had been, I was half-asleep by the time he returned. He was too disgusted to offer an explanation, and I was too proud and sleepy to beg one.

At dawn I made my morning appeal to Allah, then surveyed the camp. Our sheep lay in pathetic little piles, splotches of blood stained the snow. Four-toed footprints the size of my hand ran all about. We had been visited by a snow leopard.

This cat had been crafty; tracks showed that it had crept up from downwind, bit through the neck of our watchdog, then slaughtered the sheep at leisure. The Ironsmith had heard their bleating over my heavy breathing.

Brahmaputra was meditating in the midst of this destruction. I described the scene, asking, "What leopard lives in a land with no prey, kills every single sheep, then leaves without eating or even dragging one off?"

He nodded. "The barriers that bar Heaven's Gate are passive. They do not block, but instead make demands."

I looked back at the carnage. "This demand seems simple — turn back."

"The monks in Heaven's Gate do not kill to eat. Now we must emulate them, or leave." Brahmaputra retreated into the infinite.

Alive, the sheep had been a steady source of food. Now, they were so much frozen flesh which we hadn't the fuel to thaw. I stared up at the mountain shield that stood between us and Heaven's Gate. It was called the Wolf's Teeth, and I wondered what other simple demands it had for us. The words that Brahmaputra had spoken in the caravansary came back to me: "Four barriers bar the way: one is warm, one is cold, the first is living, the last is stone."

Then the monk himself broke through my thoughts. "Willow Moon, you must remove yourself from this young Mongol."

It was the first time he had addressed me by name. Usually, his advice was aimed through me, meant for the Mongol or the unholy world in general.

"I didn't want to be with the Mongol. Chance left me with little choice. We were both fleeing from Black Cathay. We would not have gotten this far without each other. In his own fashion the boy's been fair to me, but he is far too cruel to love."

Brahmaputra swung his arm to indicate the death and desolation around us. "How can you love life and not love cruelty? Love and hate alike bind us to the wheel of death and rebirth. In a former life you were too caring, and have suffered rebirth as a woman."

"What can you know of caring?" The words were barely in the air when I saw that I was begging for a lecture.

"When I was young," Brahmaputra began, "I cared for many things:

love, wealth, pleasure, all the mirages that power the wheel of life. My flesh clamored with a thousand wants that a million lives could not fill. So I asked my fellow monks to wall me into a rock tomb for the rest of this incarnation. To live the life and die the death of a Lama Rinpoche."

Cold came up from the lake. I liked better the old Brahmaputra, who treated me like one of the yaks, a thing useful for cooking his *tsamba* and translating his thoughts into Turkic.

"Once the last stone was mortared in, I could neither see nor feel the outside world. Each day a silent monk slipped a single bowl of *tsamba* through a bent tunnel. I licked the moisture from the rear of the cave, and a small stream carried away my meager wastes. Yet even while walled in darkness, my flesh still craved the outside world. In winter, warmth seeped out of the stones, and my body shivered and longed for fire. In spring, warmth returned and brought with it new longings."

Wind whipped over his skin, he bore it as easily as the flames from the caravansary fire. "Season followed season, and my struggle became simpler. Visions of the world grew vague. Nerves numbed and no longer plagued me. My mouth found no pleasure in food. Sex was forgotten. Life was nothing."

Had I asked to hear this? Give an infidel an inch . . .

"As I stopped taking food, the bowls from beyond accumulated. Then I heard hammering on the tomb. The monks thought I was dead, so they were breaking in to burn my body and see the soul of a saint. I waited for the sunlight to shine on my sainthood, but no light came. Finally, a fellow monk tapped me on the shoulder. During my years in blackness, I had gone blind."

Brahmaputra laughed. If this is what passed for humor, monasteries must be merry indeed.

"Everyone was disappointed. I hadn't defeated desire. I hadn't even died. The tomb had been a stone womb, leading to rebirth in the same body. Now I carry my darkness with me, so I left the cave and became a pilgrim."

I could contain myself no longer. "You claim to be battling desire, but you're the most driven man I know. Who else would wander blindly through this wilderness just to get to Heaven's Gate?"

His blind eyes remained fixed on the Sacred Lake. "My time in the tomb taught me that we are all on a pilgrimage, going from birth to rebirth. I am making mine as purposeless as possible, a blind man seeking an impossible goal. If you lead me to Heaven's Gate or cast me into a chasm, it is all one to me. That is my victory over life's illusions."

Words wouldn't come. We sat looking at the lake, though only I was seeing it. A cold sunrise over a sacred lake surrounded by snowy peaks and dead sheep just invites stupefaction.

The Ironsmith awoke and was at once in action. Without wasting words over last night's defeat, he broke up a pack saddle to fuel a fire. Once the

least mangled meat was half-roasted, he began packing. It was frightening the way the boy always did what was needed, even if it was women's work. He merely muttered, "My grandfather went all the way to Beijing, pulled the Chin Emperor's beard, and returned to tell of it. Ghost leopards aren't going to stop me."

We were on our feet and crossing the lake before I could think of any second thoughts. On dried meat and half-rations, we were headed for Heaven's Gate.

As we advanced the length of the Sacred Lake, a warm wind caressed my face. As it blew, it lifted a mist off the ice. Our feet vanished in wisps of condensation. Lake and shoreline disappeared, as did our legs, but the air above retained a transparent clarity. The mountains seemed sharper and closer. We were wading through a white cloud sea toward the Wolf's Teeth.

When the mist engulfed our heads, all motion ceased. I could hear the Ironsmith cursing above the nervous clanking of bronze yak bells, but I couldn't see a thing. Melting snow made the ice thin in places, particularly along the cliffs. We needed to stay with the still water and thick ice that ran down the center of the lake, wherever that was.

A light tapping came over the ice. It was Brahmaputra, feeling his way with a staff along the line of people and yaks. Somewhere ahead of me he stopped, announcing apologetically, "This is the second barrier; we must ignore it as well. Since I cannot see it, I will lead the way."

The Ironsmith felt his way back along the line, roping us together. I gave him a hug, but was careful to loosen my knot. If Brahmaputra blundered onto thin ice, the yaks were sure to drag us through. I didn't want a freezing bath that would end this life and spare me a hundred others as well.

There was a tug on the line, and we were walking again, though we could have been going in grand circles for all I could see in the whiteness. Then at sunset the wind ceased and the mist lifted. We were right where we wanted to be, nearing the far shore. Behind blind Brahmaputra we had walked the length of the Sacred Lake, and perhaps some sanctity now clung to our soles. The far shore was old red sandstone, and the dying sun had set it afire. Rearing above us were the Wolf's Teeth, gaping black and rugged against the crimson sky. Glaciers hung like strings of rubies, and the lake threw back the sunset, so we seemed to be advancing over a sea of blood.

We made our last cold camp on a sandstone shelf, beneath black peaks and passes. At dawn I fueled a brief fire from packing scraps and melted some sacred ice for Brahmaputra to drink. This little human act touched him. I asked how he had found our way across the lake.

"Do you notice how the yak bells echo off the cliffs that wall the lake?" He was always happy to answer one question with another.

"Yes, the echoes are sweet."

"Do you use the wind and bells to locate the cliffs?"

Without thinking, I looked up at the rock walls, rising ghostly gray in the

white morning light. "No, I don't."

"That is because you can see them." With overbearing humility, he went back to his ice water and meditation.

The Ironsmith was up and about, scanning the saw-toothed range that rose above us. Daylight showed three distinct passes. I described the scene to Brahmaputra, then asked which pass to take.

The monk meditated for a moment more, then answered, "What does it matter?"

Aided by this pearl of wisdom, the boy returned to the task of picking a pass. He selected the closest one, just to get us going.

Soon, we saw the sacred sentence writ on broken slabs of stone. Though I am blissfully ignorant of the holy script that adorns the Roof of the World, the single sentence *Om mani padme hum* was all too familiar by now. It told us that we were still on the Eightfold Path.

We mounted the pass while rotting prayer flags rapped in the thin breeze. The Roof of the World, with its massive snowcaps and aqua-green glaciers, ringed us with an agitated sea of peaks. Looking back took what little breath remained. Far below and behind, the Sacred Lake was one great frosted sheet, rimmed with red sandstone.

As I watched, black dots detached themselves from the far shore and started to inch across the lake. Mist began to boil down from the surrounding mountains and rise up off the lake. It was as if the whole earth had suddenly caught fire.

We did not wait to see how the Naymans dealt with the mist.

At the top of the pass the storm struck. I did not need Brahmaputra to tell me that this was the third barrier. The mist gathering over the lake became black clouds hurtling rain upon us. The trail was soon soaked. Puddles appeared in our path; their surfaces shattered and seething with the freezing rain. The temperature dropped as we climbed, and the rain froze into hail. Thunder rolled overhead. An army of storm giants, their steps ringing thunder through the passes, flung armfuls of ice at us.

The pass itself was choked with snow, but it was better to be blinded than stung by hailstones. The Ironsmith plodded along in the footsteps of our oldest and largest yak, with Brahmaputra bound to his belt by a cord. Clinging to the monk's red rags, I could make out the yak and Mongol as dark blurs amid the blinding white.

When the ground leveled beneath our feet, I knew we had reached the summit. The Mongol turned and trudged back to where I stood. He swung an arm toward the wall of white around us. "The other yaks are gone."

I took him at his word.

He peered suspiciously into the snow. "Perhaps they went the wrong way?"

"The wrong way?" I laughed until tears froze on my jacket. "Do you mean back toward warmth and shelter?"

With the wind at our backs we set out again, following the black yak's clanking bells. The tired beast pounded down the drifts, and we waded in its wake. In the narrowest neck of the pass, the storm subsided. When the rock walls separated, we glimpsed a green sheltered valley lying well below us.

The air was crisp and clear again, and the only foreboding touch came from mausoleums carved high up on the cliffs. They resembled temple facades, fixed flat against the cliff face. Houses for the dead cut into the living rock.

Past the tombs, the ground widened and leveled. Along one cliff face, standing twice as tall as life, stood a long line of black Buddhas. I imagined at first that they were cut from some soft dark stone, then I saw that they were made from something far more precious. They were carved from wood and oiled black against the elements. In this treeless land, large logs were rarer than gold. These Buddhas had begun life as tree turnks in some lowland jungle. It had taken much labor or tremendous magic to haul them all these miles into the sky.

Beyond the last Buddha, a sheer stone wall blocked the canyon. It was plastered smooth and tilted outward, making it impossible to climb. The cliff faces on either side were also polished flat. This fourth barrier was by far the best. The only entrance was a locked bronze gate, many times taller than us, but a mere dent in the smooth surface of the wall. High atop this lofty stonework long-haired monkeys danced and capered. Their jeers needed no translation. From their aerial retreat, whole families hurtled insults and fruit husks down on us.

I studied the fruit husks, while the Ironsmith's scimitar beat on the portal. "That valley must indeed be warm for monkeys to eat fruit such as this."

The boy's blows made the bronze gate ring like a great bell. "Are they deaf? Don't they know we are here?"

Brahmaputra laughed. "How could the holy monks of Heaven's Gate know less than a tribe of monkeys?"

Not hard, I thought, though I translated without comment.

"This is the fourth and final barrier. We must ignore it as we did the others." Brahmaputra folded into a full lotus and followed his own advice.

The air smelled of snow. Storm clouds were filtering through the gap behind us. The old yak turned sorrowful eyes from man to man, then crumpled down beside Brahmaputra. This faithful fellow had not had a real meal in days. He was too discouraged even to forage on the fruit husks. The beast's breathing became labored. Each flagging breath condensed quickly as the temperature fell.

I called out a storm warning.

Neither man nor boy paid me much heed. The Ironsmith stalked back and forth before the gate. Brahmaputra observed that great suffering offered the opportunity for even greater indifference.

So I sat down by the dying yak, feeling sorry for both of us. The ropy lay-

ers of rock above the dressed stone took on strange shapes. Malignant demons mingled with fallen angels, sculpted by the hand of Allah and staring back at me. My empty bowels churned for freshly cooked food. Dried meat is monotonous, even when spiced with rancid yak butter and raw flour. I longed for fresh meat; vegetables were but a fond memory.

The monkeys' cries rose to a crescendo. Then our tormentors fled for shelter as the storm boiled down the canyon.

Snow began to bank around us again. The boy turned his back to the gate and waded over Brahmaputra. "Naymans or no, we are going back."

The monk needed no translation, for the Mongol's tone told everything, but Brahmaputra would not budge. "This is the last barrier. Meet it also with indifference. To die at the gate to your greatest goal is to triumph over life's illusions."

The boy heard me repeat these words, then shook his head. "Here we must part. Retreat is no disgrace; death is the only real defeat for a Mongol."

He turned to collect me, and I tottered to my feet. The last we saw of Brahmaputra in this life, he was seated beside a dying yak murmuring *Om mani padme hum*, to no one and everyone.

Making our way uphill was almost impossible. We found ourselves forging through waves of cold wet snow, cascading down from the pass. Without the yak to pound out a path, the drifts dragged us down. Tired of the whole ordeal, I clung to the Ironsmith with one hand, while swimming through the snow with the other.

At first it hurt horribly to hold on, but then my arm became numb. My mind drifted. A warm white cushion came up and caught my body. My hand awoke in pain, and I realized that it no longer held the boy's belt. My feet weren't moving, and I was lying face down in the snow. A surge of panic rolled me over. There was nothing to see but shimmering white. I was afraid to close my eyes, but it took real effort to hold them open. At least I was no longer cold.

All at once the storm parted, and an angel in black leather stooped down, lifting me to my feet. The boy had come back for me. He turned me round and pushed me forward. I thought, thank Allah the wind has shifted. The snow was at our backs now, and it made staggering so much easier. The ground leveled off, and I stumbled against the knees of a giant Buddha. The wind hadn't turned — we had! We were headed back to Heaven's Gate.

At the end of an eternity of Buddhas sat Brahmaputra, frozen into a full lotus, frost fast collecting on his face.

By snuggling up to the dead yak, the Ironsmith and I won a bit of shelter. The boy's sheepskin vest and leggings made him look more than ever like a wolf in the fold. I didn't bother to thank him. As he had said, defeat was no disgrace for a Mongol, but turning back for a woman showed weakness of character.

Glaring at the long line of oil-blackened Buddhas, he said, "I'm not going

to die."

"Fine, then do me one last favor." I leaned back against the yak. "When the thaw comes, dig through the frost, and give me a burial fit for the faithful. Lie me facing Mecca, and clear a spot by the grave where any wandering muslim may pause to say the prayer for the dead. In these parts they only burn the bodies of saints; poor sinners such as we are thrown to the wild beasts and temple dogs."

Without a word, he leaped up and began tossing equipment out of the pack saddle. I felt guilty for not removing the poor yak's burden so the beast could die in comfort. Yet the yak's soul was no doubt busy starting life in some new body, much too busy to think ill of me. I tried to imagine where I was headed. The Holy Koran is obscure about the exact place of women in Paradise. It does mention multitudes of virgins to amuse and delight male believers. Did this mean that I would enter Paradise as a virgin again? The thought had both intriguing and alarming aspects. Notice how when you really need a mullah's wisdom there is never one for miles.

A muslim may sit back and say *inshallah*, as Allah wills, but without the comfort that comes from submission, the ignorant infidel falls back on action. From the bottom of the pack, the Ironsmith produced an ax. The feel of this tool seemed to refresh him. He strode over the the nearest Buddha and began attacking its ankles. Splinters from ancient wood showered onto the snow, then the great saint tottered and fell. The Mongol chopped him into handier pieces and rolled them up against the yak.

Kneeling beside the broken Buddha, the boy went to work with flint and steel, kindling a spark inside the statue's dry heart. Once he had an oily fire blazing, he fed larger pieces of the Buddha into it, building up to a bonfire.

I marveled at the way warmth made life more worth living. Flames danced and popped, melting the snow as it fell. The Ironsmith cut strips off the warm side of the yak, and soon they were sizzling in the fire. Roasting meat added even more meaning to existence. If Brahmaputra had not been such a vegetarian, I'm sure the aroma alone would have brought him back.

We were sitting fat and happy by the fire, nibbling bits of burnt liver, when the bronze gate opened a crack. The gap widened, then half a dozen heathen monks, wearing tall yellow hats with long ear flaps, trotted out onto the snow. They stopped at a respectful distance and stuck out their tongues. Swallowing our yak liver, we returned the greeting.

Their leader edged forward and addressed the Ironsmith. "Welcome to Heaven's Gate." His hand flicked out of his red robe, indicating the burning Buddha. "What is the meaning of this?"

I translated while the boy wiped grease from his grin. He considered the destruction, then sighed. "I was told that if I burned a Buddha, I would see the soul of a saint."

The monks conferred, like a clump of mushrooms standing in the snow, then their leader addressed us again. "But can a wooden Buddha have a soul?"

I repeated this in Turkic, and the Ironsmith cast a despairing eye on his handiwork. "I was indeed disappointed in this one." Then the boy's face brightened, and he waved his ax at the long line of statues fading into the storm. "However, we have many Buddhas left to try."

After much polite pleading, we abandoned our indifference, agreeing to desist and accept the hospitality of Heaven's Gate. ●

KNIGHT RIDER

Alter ego, yes, I have
a perfectly excellent one,
I keep it safe and secret
until the day is done.

Then as the sun descends
And as the moon appears,
I send a-hawking my secret self
until the dawning nears.

Beneath my silk nightrobe there lies
an honor blade to wield,
My green enameled armor
and cherished sword and shield,
High boots of verdant leather,
Tunic, dark as midnight's wing,
And as the moon sails young and new
I ride to save a king.

You will never view that self
in days while sun shines bright,
For that one comes and walks the world
only in the velvet night.
You can but see mild-mannered me,
But that's your loss, I fear,
For nightly that self a-hawking goes
until the dawning nears.

— Kay Pealstrom

ON

Exhibit

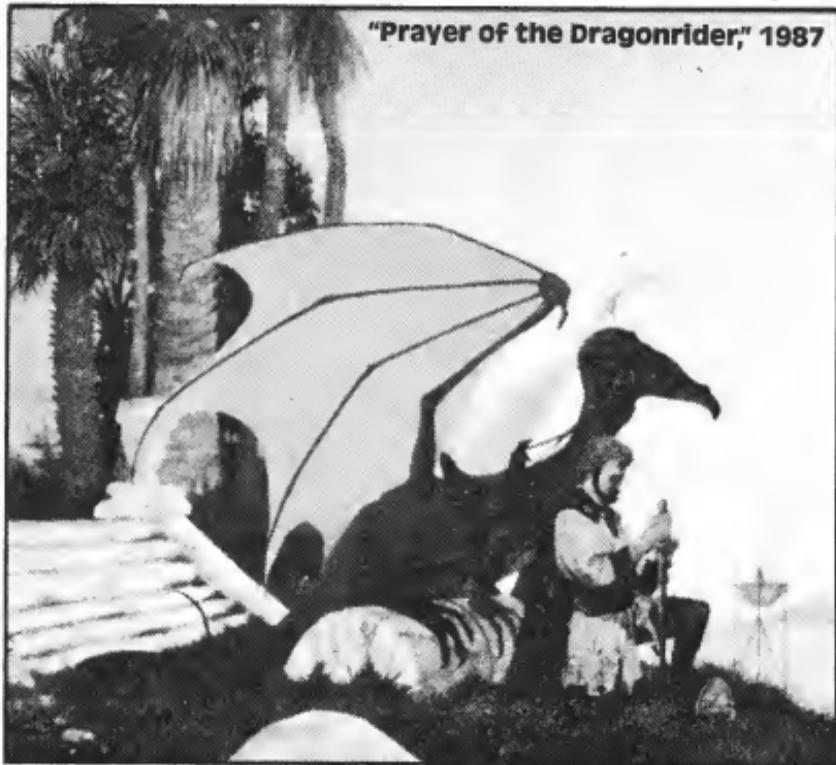
Daniel R. Horne

As a young boy, artist Daniel R. Horne always enjoyed adventure movies: tales about Robin Hood, Sinbad, and all those wonderful films set in the era of King Arthur. In fact,

he used to dress up as Robin Hood or Sinbad and tramp around the woods with his friends, re-enacting the scenes from the various adventure films of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. His first introduction to literary fantasy was Robert E. Howard's novel *Son of the White Wolf*. Daniel claims, "I've been hooked on fantasy ever since then."

Daniel graduated from the York Academy of Arts in 1982, and he has studied painting and illustration pri-

"Prayer of the Dragonrider," 1987





"Orcslayer," 1986



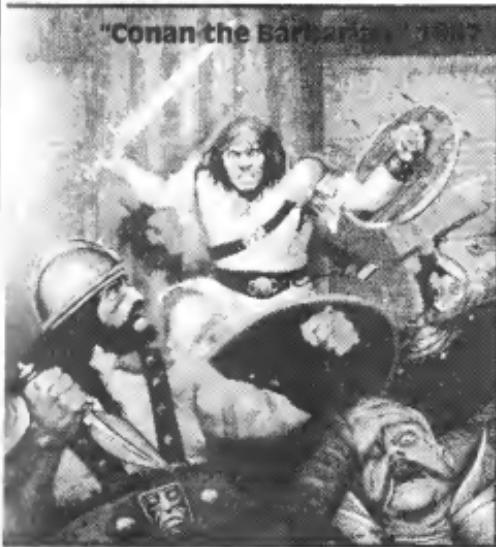
"Sinbad and the Storyteller," 1988



"Jack and the Beanstalk," 1986

Daniel R. Horne

"Conan the Barbarian," 1987



"Robin and Little John," 1987



vately under the tutelage of illustrator Ken Laager, a fourth-generation Howard-Pyle student. Daniel's artwork has been inspired by such talents as Peter Brueghel the Elder, Richard Dadd, John William Godward, Howard Pyle, and N. C. Wyeth. About 95% of his artwork is done in oils, since he believes that "there is a flexibility in oils that allows me to express fully the mood and characters of the story I'm illustrating."

Daniel has had one-man art exhibits at the Pendragon Gallery in Annapolis, Maryland, and at the Cliveden in Germantown, Pennsylvania. His artwork has also appeared in such publications as *The Art of DRAGON® Magazine* and *The Book: Who's Who in Science Fiction and Fantasy Illustration 1988*.

Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Daniel's artwork, can contact him at his studio. Write to: Daniel R. Horne, 570 N. 23rd Street, #12A, Philadelphia PA 19130.

NOVATION

Mothed in asteroids goes the dwarf — stroke-blown hell-world —
Chilling the bones in dead ships. The numb dwarf weaving
Then meteors both to a ring: fissured; flywheel flat;
Volcano-welded with spray-paint metals; glowing red.
Through iron fog, a pelting monsoon-clatter of stones
Bounces a hail-dance, drills down applause, for a stellicide gone

Awry. Blind planets grope their way to find what's gone.
The star travelers finally return. Their year-worn mother world,
Now laked in frozen lead, is an airless planet of stones.
They view its past on movies. A distant time runs weaving
Through the projector's loom. No more that noontime red,
Nor sunsets violet-robed. These charnel skies look flat.

Their searchlight eyes the ruins under the President's flat:
Here two buckles melted, there the pipes are gone.
Some things, unshaded, vaporized; others glowed bright red,
Then cooled, as these clay tablets that tell of another world —
A ring-world made out of asteroids by a theory's numbered weaving.
The sodium lamp can uncover no dead in that furnace of stones,

But the heirloomed theory is dusted, then lifted like fossilized stones.
The ceramic maps are studied. The proofs are laid out flat.
Remarking aloud in surprise, the crew traces the weaving
A silken ribbon has etched against the clay. Now gone,
It marks the gift — a Royal Astronomer's post-dwarf world.
They jostle their prism-scope out. They scan for the sun's deep red:

It bisects the ring and beads the slit — a picket-fence red
Of iron emission lines . . . greens and blues . . . and the Dopplered stones!
As theory turns fact, some look through smoked glass for that welding world
In the glare of the dwarf. Then spread on a graph, the spectrum laid flat
Like a beating heart's ink silhouette — its light only hours gone
From the heat — that circular world gathers fate and the crew in its weaving.

The crew is apprised they are leaving. Tailors aboard begin weaving
The shoes and the robes of asbestos for the grieving on the
world that glows red.

The monument of their species is not that the race was gone
But the thing in the future it thought to describe, as heaven on stones
In a graveyard. So, orphaned and proud, they stand to behold, from the flat
Of that circular track: The sun rise and set in the well of that world;

It makes day and night go on weaving. The halo-stopped
asteroids and stones
Had been dragged through the shell-plumes till red. Their
orbits then energy-flat
Went spiraling sunward till gone; left the crippled sun
crowned with a world.

— John Devin



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A THIEF IN BABYLON

by Paul Di Filippo

art: Roger Raupp





Paul Di Filippo lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his mate, Deborah. When not writing short stories and novels, Paul edits the now-famous, quasi-mystical, quasi-hysterical, SF news(?)letter Astral Avenue.

"A Thief in Babylon" is his second sale to Amazing® Stories; his first was *"Kid Charlemagne"* (September 1987).

How many light-years to Babylon?

That's a question members of the Conservancy never fail to ask — and which seldom fails to catch me by surprise. It's so typical of their way of thinking — a way so alien to mine — that no matter how long I tarry wearily among them (on neutral worlds only, of course), I'm always unprepared to answer, much as they seem unready for and shocked by such a simple feature as my spinal plaques, which I take so much for granted.

The fact is, only someone who subscribes to the old notions of Truehome would ask for the distance to Babylon in lights, rather than simply inquire after its relativistic coordinates. Not to mention being repelled by my bodily modifications, while seeing nothing wrong in using a bodyfogger to appear as a disembodied head himself —

But just because I exhibit certain mannerisms and bodymods consistent with the Commensality does not automatically imply that I am rigidly opposed to the Conservancy. That old either-or, bivalent mindset is property of the Conservancy's system solely. It would be wrong to apply it to anyone such as myself.

Truly, although both they and I denote our systems with cees, we are seas apart.

No, I say — facing my hypothetical and stereotypical Conservator interlocutor, whether on moon or planet, ship or station, under suns green, blue, red, or white, him usually polite enough to reveal his face by keeping his roiling, gadget-driven optical distortion focused below his neck — your question does not annoy me. I recognize that you have unbent enough to show me your stern face. (I wish — how I wish — that another man in another time and place had unbent as much.) I am pleased to talk with you about Babylon.

Perhaps my composite conversationalist knows the ancient children's rhyme. Conservancy types cherish such things, and it gives me a point of introduction. (I TAPPED it once and it stayed with me, so I can relate it now.)

How many miles to Babylon?

Three score miles and ten.

Can I get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again.

If your heels are nimble and light,

You may get there by candlelight.

Babylon. Like anyplace else in this infinitely accessible universe, it's just a Heisenberg transition away, so I suppose in a sense you can reach it before a candle's brief flame flickers out. And when you arrive, it helps if your heels — and mind — are nimble and light, as mine once were.

But as for getting back again —

Well — once you invest as much of yourself in Babylon as I and others have, you can never really leave.

Although, of course, you can always do what our age specializes in.

You can always run away.

Night came down like a hammer.

Certainly, if you know the least little bit about Babylon — and who doesn't? — you must realize I've just lied.

All that really happened was that Babylon shut off the light strips that were an integral part of the enormous transparent shell enclosing our city, in accordance with the programmed diurnal cycle.

But what the hell kind of opening line is that? Literalness is such a downer.

No, the story starts much better if I say night came calling. But since some Babylonians — such as myself — who had been born elsewhere still instinctively regarded the phenomenon that way, I think I'll keep it.

Night came down like a hammer.

Outside our shell, dirty clouds of methane and nitrogen swirled, banded a dozen shades of smoggy pink, orange, and grey, rendered faintly luminous by the radiance of the gas giant around which our satellite revolved. (Contributing also, of course, was the feeble light from the far-off primary around which the gas giant in turn revolved, a star somewhere in that part of infinity that the Conservancy insists on calling Gemini, the twins.)

Light bloomed in a thousand tall towers throughout the city and fell from myriad free-floating globes. The assorted citizens striding the syalon streets seemed to speed up their pace, as if responding to age-old imperatives their rational selves would have denied.

The night quickened. Everyone, everywhere, grew at least a little more alert after dark, wary of the eyes beyond the fire.

I felt hyped up myself. But then again, I had more reason than most to feel so.

Half an hour after mottled darkness fell, I was ready to step from the departure platform on the fiftieth floor of a residential tower, carrying something that didn't belong to me. I was confident that no one had seen me take the item, which was small enough to fit neatly beneath the waistband of my jox. And valuable enough to carry me through half a year of lazy pleasures. Well worth the risk involved, thought I.

With my hand on a brass boss studding my black leather chest-yoke, ready to activate the lift circuitry built into the harness, I was congratulating

myself on another job well done. That was when the watchmek's laser nearly clipped my ear off.

I fell flat on the drop ledge, having whirled to face the direction of fire. Back in the building, the mek got off another shot that ran a lash of pain along my back.

Biting down on a yell, I pointed my index finger at the officious but stupid thing.

From the small seed that was a solid-state laser embedded under my fingernail sprouted a beam that pierced the mek. It fell over with a dull *clunk*.

I stood, legs shaky, back scorched. (The only good thing about laser wounds is how they self-cauterize.) My harness fell off, neatly severed, leaving me bare except for sandals and thong (and if you count ornaments, however multipurposed, my carcanet). My first choice for escape was now gone. I wasn't about to step off the platform into midair *sans* lift harness, no matter how desperate.

I had two options left. The first was to take the building's slow gravshaft down — at the bottom of which would surely be waiting a nasty crowd of concerned citizens, summoned by Babylon.

The second looked like an even worse choice. I could go up five floors to the roof, send a TAP for a taxi (the platform here was big enough for individuals only), and wait to be immured within the vehicle, which Babylon would surely override and freeze when he realized what was going on.

I raced inside and headed for the roof.

Sometimes a choice looks bad only because you don't know all the angles.

On the roof — fifty-five floors full of chambered sophonts closer to the luminescent killer heavens than where I wanted to be — I issued a TAP for the taxi, just to confuse things, then requested the time.

[20:10:01] came the response.

The Hanging Gardens were due by in three minutes. I had carefully noted their schedule before I attempted this job.

Searching the gloom, I spotted the floating mass: a twinkling faerie palace overgrown with greenery, set on a wide thick disk amid several landscaped hectares.

The minutes it took to drift toward me seemed eons. Running one thick finger between torc and neck (a foolish mannerism, I know, but one I couldn't break), I watched the egress to the liftshaft, expecting it to vomit forth meks and men any second.

But no one came. And then the Gardens were overhead.

There were no buildings in Babylon taller than the one I stood on. The Gardens were why.

The polychrome sky was suddenly occulted, and I was in plant-fragrant Shadow; voices drifted down to me. At the same time a creeper brushed my cheek like the antenna of a godhorse. Kicking off my sandals, I tossed my arms up, searching for thicker vines.

Found them.

Swarmed up.

Kids did this on a dare all the time, little caring about the community-service sentence they risked if caught. Once in a while, if they were foolish enough to attempt the climb without a lift harness and lost their hold, they died. Not having grown up here, I had never enjoyed such a thrill before.

Now I was making up for my placid off-world youth.

The Gardens, continuing their slow and stately pavane, left the tower behind. I was halfway up a rubbery liana, hanging a quarter of a kilometer up above the ceramic pavement. I made the mistake of looking down on the carpet of lights, and dizziness blurred my senses. I stopped climbing for a moment until I regained my equilibrium. Then I went as fast as I dared straight to the top.

A leg over the railing, then the other, and I was standing on solid "ground" again. The commingled scents of flowers greeted me.

My arms ached and my legs felt like gelatin. My chest and back were slicked with sweat and possibly blood from my reopened wound. The tension had nurtured a headache that kicked with every pulse.

But beneath my waistband was a fortune waiting to be redeemed.

I looked up in relief. At such a time it would have been good to look upon the stars. (You see, I retained some Conservancy attitudes even after living in Babylon for so long.)

But only a gaudy greasy fog greeted my gaze.

So I moved off.

Avoiding the couples, trios, and quartets ("More than four's a bore," they said in the city that month; next month it would be something altogether different, if not antithetical) gathered in the hidden dim purlieus and bowers, past the dancers adorning a plaza, and to the airbus stand.

If I had known then how soon I'd be back in the Gardens, I might not have hurried so.

Minutes later I was down and lost in the busy streets.

I still had a lot to do. Meet the fence who'd buy my prize, recharge by induction field the subepidermal capacitor that powered my one-shot laser, then, finally, relax.

Task one took an hour, two a minute of that same hour, and three —

I was in a bar that catered to my kind of pleasure, relaxing with a drink, when I spotted him. He was the most beautiful godhorse I had ever seen.

Conservators, of course, call them mantises, or sometimes even bugs. Funny, then, how they resent being called apes themselves. (Once I TAPPED an ancient novel about humanity warring with a race called Bugs, and wished I never had. Pure Conservancy thinking at its most raw.) But any human in the Commensality will call them by some variation of the old folk etymology, godhorse.

This one was a male, with proud uplifted pyramidal head and finely

formed mandibles, shining thorax, and strong hind legs. His four folded wings were strong, gemmed membranes that stirred slightly as I watched; his forelegs were delicacy and precision incarnate. His color at the moment was a relaxed olive.

I'm a big man, but he was taller, although not half my mass.

I initiated a TAP between us. The godhorses understood human language, but our ears were just not set up to interpret their stridulations. Without Babylon as intermediary, we would have been unable to communicate.

And a TAP was so much more intimate anyway.

[Commensal,] I sent in the familiar way, [your sustenance is mine.]

[And yours mine,] he replied. [Do you wish an encounter?]

[Very much,] I said. [And you?]

[You are a handsome human. I have never seen your color skin before. It is like space itself.]

I knew he was newly arrived then, since I'm hardly the only one in Babylon of this shade. [I take that as a yes,] I sent. [Shall we go to a place I know of?]

[Indeed.]

We left the bar together and —

I pause here, recalling the reactions I've gotten from Conservators when I've described relations among Commensals before. They always adjust their bodyfogggers to hide their faces in disgust. That's one thing I can't stand. I expect them to listen as fellow sophonts, not as a chaos of optical distortion. Conservators might call all who embrace the Commensality perverts, but they always damn well learn before I'm done that we're perverts with principles.

As I was saying:

— went to a Commensality-supported sensorium.

In our private cube I stripped off my lone pouch of a garment. (I was still barefoot and harnessless.) The godhorse wore not so much as a button. He had turned a bright red with excitement.

I laid down on my stomach on the soft organiform couch in the twilit room, and he climbed atop me. His chitin was cool, and he weighed nothing in Babylon's light gravity. His mandibles clacked alongside my collared neck, and his forearm spurs bit into my back. (And now you know the reason for my spinal plaques and carcanet: protection from a caress too violent.)

[Now I master you!] he sent.

I felt his intoxicant saliva snail my jaw. (On Truehome they used to believe the brown drool of the little native godhorses would provoke madness.)

The godhorse stridulated wildly, sawing his hind legs against his wings. Knowing what was next, I got more excited.

Pinning me in a hold I could easily have broken, but chose not to (isn't



A Thief in Babylon 95

that the essence of love?), he bit my shoulder, opening up old scars.

His saliva mingled with my blood.

In seconds the world exploded in hallucinatory pleasure, the hot bright fragments shooting off into the void, leaving only pure blackness behind, which swallowed me down and down.

When I came out of it, the godhorse was gone. I flipped over onto my back and let the couch grow a patch for my shoulder. Then I got up, dressed, and left.

What do they get out of it? Good question. The answer lies, I think, in the fact that only the male godhorses indulge, and they don't care if their partner is a male or female.

Imagine how you would feel if you could mount someone who absolutely, positively wouldn't bite your head off, as a female or even fellow male godhorse might, in the throes of passion.

The fact that their saliva is synergistic with our biochemistry is just lagniappe for us.

Because they're so beautiful, and humans are so exogamous, we'd lie with them anyway, I'm sure, even if they didn't provide a dose of pure ecstasy.

I was tired and sated and anxious to get home and rest. Night was ending. A full twelve hours of hard work and near-death and the little death of pleasure, and my mind was foggy from it all.

So when the small man with the dead face stepped from an alley outside the sensorium and said, "Hello, Meat," (more about my name later) I didn't react as fast as usual.

Squinting (the light globe here was dead and lying on the syalon, and the next nearest was three meters off), I said, "Ace? How are you? I heard a bad rumor about you. They said you were brain-cored."

His voice was without affect. "He was."

So then I knew.

I was talking with Babylon.

Let's digress a minute.

The topic?

Governments.

The Conservancy, the Commensality, and the rough, two-backed beast they make up, sprawling across all creation, locked together in a perpetual ritual encounter akin to both sex and cannibalism. (You'll excuse the mixed metaphor, I hope, but mating and food are Commensality preoccupations.)

The trouble is that the two systems (although I might make a point here that the Commensality is really a myriad of systems that happen to acknowledge a rather limited set of common principles) are just so damned incompatible.

The Conservancy believes in government by an elite corps of trained professionals, enforcing laws meant to secure the maximum good for the great-

est numbers. Conservators desire physical and temporal continuity across the stars, which, you'll pardon my bluntness, is just plain crazy, given the facts of travel by Heisenberg transition. (What can borders possibly demarcate when every point on the space-time continuum is contiguous with every other point?) And they have that completely illogical fetish about an imaginary purity that mankind must adhere to.

That's the Conservancy. I know its principles intimately, from arguments with one of its sharpest proponents, my brother.

His name?

That doesn't matter.

He's dead now.

Anyway. Now what about us? The Commensality.

Our precepts are harder to codify. We don't have an official canon like theirs. But there're a few saints in our hagiography, and one was a pantheistic holy fool from Truehome who claimed that "government governs best which governs least." We subscribe to that. Also the essential equality of all sophonts, unlike those species chauvinists.

How, you might wonder, does one go about implementing such ideals? Some central coordination is required in any society above a certain level, and once one grants power to any subset of people, it seems they always manage to want more and more. And equality — that's an even more fantastic notion.

The answer to both is Babylon.

Not the city. The AOI beneath it.

Running every large-sized social unit that calls itself part of the Commensality you will find an Artifical Organic Intelligence. Basically a huge biofabbed mass of paraneurons, with an information-carrying capacity that no one has yet effectively delimited, these beings communicate among themselves across space — and with us via TAP. They hold all knowledge in common, dispensing it upon request. (Fair access to information is equality.) They coordinate interpersonal communications by the Tele-Adjunct and Psychoprosthetic which is as much a part of every member of the Commensality as any sensory organ he was born with. And through their agents — mek and human — they do all the managerial scutwork that is so damn boring but necessary.

How can we stand to entrust our welfare to such a "thing"?

That "thing" is literally no more capable of self-aggrandizement than a person is of keeping his pupils dilated if I flash a bright light in his eyes. And for the same reason: built-in biological limits. AOI's are the first truly beneficent "rulers" in history. (Of course, you know that word in quotes is all wrong.)

Beneficent, that is, until someone or something threatens them or the Commensality.

Then watch out.

Which brings us to the end of digression —
— and the beginning of panic.

I was talking with Babylon.

The ceramic pavement grew cold beneath my bare feet, although objectively nothing changed. The shadows (not Shadow) around us seemed deep enough to swallow galaxies. I dipped a blunt finger under my torc and rimmed its reassuring solidity. My heart was beating like the core of a sun, and I willed it down to normal.

I knew Ace was going to be a little slower, now that he had been cored —

Cored? Babylon catches a person who, despite the elastic parameters of life in the Commensality, has qualified as a disruptive rogue, destructive to the freedom of others. (It's all very scientific, each person building up a life-index sort of like karma in the AOI's banks, and you have to be pretty nasty to qualify for coring. My daily complacency hinged on the belief that I wasn't.) In a simple operation, the rogue's higher brain components are scooped out, leaving enough of the reptilian brain to handle the autonomic functions. A mass of paraneurons is dumped in, giving the AOI direct control of the body, and *voilà*, an agent. Best use of a bad apple: Moral: don't screw with Babylon and your fellows.

— but I couldn't gamble on taking him out or outrunning whatever weapons onry he had modded in.

Thinking fast, I realized that maybe there was no reason to do either. Perhaps this was strictly a social call, having nothing to do with any of my nefarious deeds.

Although I doubted it, I decided to play it that way.

"Ace — uh, Babylon. Hello. Nice to see you. A simple TAP would have gotten my attention just as well."

The dead man didn't smile. I had heard that Babylon had trouble portraying emotions, and Ace's immobile features tended to confirm this.

"That is exactly the opposite of the truth," said the AOI with the living corpse's unmodulated voice. "You could have denied the TAP. But not this revenant. I find such encounters quite effective."

Babylon stared at me until shivers laddered my dorsal plaques. Then he spoke again. "Let us walk. We have things to speak of."

What could I say?

We started walking down the nearly empty predawn streets.

Above, it began to rain liquid methane. It sounded like a horde of little clawed animals scrambling atop the dome.

"The Conservancy has made a new move in their war on us," were Babylon's first words after we began to stroll, him in a slightly stiff-legged way.

"War is dead," I parroted.

"Insofar as you mean attack by gross physical means, you merely repeat common knowledge. Neither we nor the Conservancy dare risk antagoniz-

ing the other to the point where our opponent would be provoked to, say, translate a few tons of rock directly into the same coordinates as a population center. Being equally vulnerable, we are all equally restrained. But the universe we know is in a constant state of war nonetheless. Our weapon is sheer example. By running an open society, we seduce individuals and worlds constantly away from the Conservancy. Their weapon is propaganda of a most insidious sort."

I stopped short. "They've brought the Chronicle to Babylon."

"Yes. The Conservancy has sent a representative carrying their Chronicle of Mankind. He's just moved into the Gardens and is already playing it for the curious. I am helpless to stop him. My whole reason for being is the free dissemination of information. But the information he has brought is a virus that will kill this world, or at least transform it into an outpost of the Conservancy. Which is the same as death for you and me. Unless we kill him first."

I started walking again, silent. Babylon followed. We passed a lone axolotl, her neotenic clown's face smiling. I think she wanted to cruise us, but Babylon must have sent some warning TAP. In a second her elastic features grew worried, and she hurried off.

At last I said, "Why are you telling me this? Can't you just handle it yourself? Isn't that your job, to protect our way of life?"

"There can be no official connection between me and the diplomat's death. We dare not risk violent repercussions. No, I need a tool. And you are that tool."

I risked some shuck and jive. I should have known it was useless.

"Me? I don't know anything about such things. I'm a simple hedonist. Why, the very thought —"

Babylon laid a hand on my arm, and I shut up.

Then he recited every last crime I'd committed since coming to Babylon. It was a long list.

"So you see," he finished, "I know you. You are the one I want. Find this Conservator and kill him. If we accomplish nothing else, we'll buy a little time while the Conservancy decides what to do. At best, they might grow discouraged and pick another target."

I quit pretending. "What's in it for me? Why should I risk myself to help you?"

"You're a member of the Commensality," Babylon reminded me. "As such, you're a de facto enemy to the Conservancy. If the Conservators win here, and they catch you before you can get out in the mass exodus, they'll scrub your brain. Me, they hate simply because I'm artificial. Mocklife, they call me. But you have two strikes against you. You've dared to modify the sacred human physiological 'norm.' And you practice miscegenation."

"Anti-em," I spat.

"Tagging your opponent with an expletive does not reduce his threat.

And you should feel some loyalty toward your commensals. If that is not enough, then consider this. You are about to trip my rogue-trigger. Soon, if you continue your current lifestyle — and I do not predict you will change — you will become a legitimate target for my enmity. If you help me in this, I will wipe the ledger clean, and you will have at least as many years free from my dedicated pursuit as you have yet enjoyed."

I thought about it for a minute. It seemed the type of argument that was kind of impossible to refute.

"Okay," I said. "I'll do it."

Babylon didn't smile, but I sensed an AOI analog to that emotion.

"I thought you would see things my way," he said. Then:

[And I'll be keeping track of you.]

Day was born like a nova.

(Actually: light strips, Babylon, literalism, *et cetera*.)

I stood blinking for a second or two. When I was done, the body that had once been my pal Ace was gone. As to the nature of his future errands, I did not care to speculate. Especially since someday his fix might be mine. But I wouldn't be able to worry about it if cored — or would I? What tiny portions of personality and memories were left intact, down there in the coree's brainstem, and what must he feel?

I wasn't anxious to find out.

Sudden fatigue washed over me like a tide of despair. I had gone a day now without sleep — not counting the godhorse-induced trance, which stimulated rather than soothed — and almost that long without food. I had been shot at by a mek, carried aloft on a floating island like Gulliver on Laputa (I remember TAPPING for that particular image), and scared half out of my wits by the civic entity who was supposed to be protecting me.

And the worst of it was that I couldn't stop now. I had to think. Matters were far from settled. Just because I had told Babylon I was going to cooperate didn't mean I would.

There was always the option of flight.

That might have been someone else's first choice. After all, I claimed earlier that this is an age of running away. With interstellar travel so cheap and easy, what else could one expect? Intelligence has always deluded itself into believing that circumstances were the limiting factor when usually it was intelligence itself that was the source of trouble. And you can't flee yourself so easily.

Now, I'm not knocking escape. After all, I once fled to Babylon and found a kind of happiness. But there was a good reason why I couldn't just up and run now, except as a last resort, and I don't expect you to see it.

The reason was the TAP.

Conservators are simultaneously to be pitied and envied. More pitied, of course, because they deny themselves all the manifold virtues of a TAP,

claiming such devices are intrusions on the human brain. And envied, just a little, because they aren't tied down like us.

Sometimes a TAP goes down deep as a taproot.

Suppose you spent all your life (in the case of someone born into the *Commensality*) or a good portion of your adult years (my case) relying on this massive auxiliary memory-cum-switchboard-cum-advisor-cum-stimulator. After a while, the AOI, with its individual idiosyncracies (it does have them), becomes as integral to your sense of self as your bodily feedback. Further, suppose you one day decide on a change of scenery. Of course, you won't voluntarily pick someplace without TAP facilities. Your destination's bound to be another locus of the *Commensality*. So you TAP into Babylon and send:

[Please grow a mass of nonsentient paraneurons containing all my personal data, which I may take with me.]

Surprisingly soon, a mek or, God forbid, someone like Ace arrives with a little homeostatic container that holds some pretty important stuff. You handle it as nervously as if it were an embryo, which it sort of is.

You arrive at your new home. (Of course, all this applies only for a permanent move. And please notice how neatly the instant transition from the previous paragraph to this one mimics the Heisenberg transition itself.) You hand over your container to an agent of the new AOI, who promptly integrates the cells into himself. Now, however, like new lovers, you and the AOI have to accommodate to each other. A rather touchy proposition, and not without its share of urgent uneasiness. And sometimes, like a bad mating, the match never stabilizes.

The net effect of all this is that we in the *Commensality* tend to be rather sedentary.

And that's why I wasn't going to leave unless forced to.

My stomach rumbled as I stood there in the rapidly filling streets. The methane rain had stopped, and the sky within the dome was filling with individual fliers and aircars.

I couldn't see too far ahead, but I knew at that moment that I wanted a couple of things.

A meal, and a walk around the bay.

I set off for a refectory. The movement felt good.

At the refectory portal — just an arched opening without a door; lacking weather, there was no reason for doors except privacy, and a refectory was the opposite of private — I passed in. The first room contained the showers. I stripped and washed up with the others there, then passed into the refectory proper.

Did you ever look up the derivation of *Commensality*? Good, then you'll understand the importance of what went on in the refectory.

Eating binds. Every old human culture locked to the soil of Truehome understood that, on one level or another. Share salt, and an enemy becomes your friend. If you want to forge links with a sophont, try eating with/on/

around/against him.

Inside the big, open, high-ceilinged room that was the refectory, there were members of species that employed all those prepositions.

There were humans that ranged from the Conservancy-unmodified norm to those who were altered into the nearly alien. There were godhorses (so beautiful) and axolotls (so comical) and slidewhistles (so noisy). Not to mention a dozen other races I haven't the heart to detail because I miss them so. All were unclothed and busy eating, from trough and plate and bowl and hopper. The pungent aromas were making my belly sit up and beg.

So I plunged in.

When my hunger was assuaged and my spirits restored, I hit the showers in the room ante the exit. (Some races seem to enjoy wearing their food more than actually eating it.) I picked out a new jox and sandals and lift harness (my standard outfit) from the clothing alcove and exited onto the streets. (Such necessities are freely disbursed in the Commensality. But there're still plenty of private possessions for me to lift.)

I headed then for the bayside locks. A quiet place to think was next.

At the locks, I took a quilt from its rack and donned it. The living flesh (no brains, just ganglions) molded itself to my body, sealing my precious hide away from the deadly atmosphere I was about to step into. For a second I was blind and deaf. Then I TAPPED into the feed from a camera mounted in the locker room. I saw myself as I looked now to others: something like an inflated rubber biped balloon.

I switched the TAP to receive the sensory inputs of the quilt. Since it "saw" exclusively by infrared, had no hearing, and "tasted" over its entire surface, you can imagine that the world altered rather radically.

I cycled through the locks and stood on the shore. It tasted like acid and salt beneath my squishy soles.

The surface temperature of our satellite hovers around the triple point of methane: minus 168 degrees centigrade, the critical temperature at which that compound can exist as solid, liquid, or gas.

The shore was solid.

The turbulent sea that stretched away was liquid.

The air was gas (gases, actually, nitrogen supplying the major component).

Breathing the oxygen suspired by the quilt, I started walking around the curving marge that lay between the city-shell and the lapping sea. It looked like the tide was coming in (courtesy of the primary's gravity), and so I had to be careful not to get isolated on some inaccessible spit. The quilt could stand immersion in the liquid methane, but the damn stuff tasted just like gasoline, and you risked getting swept out into the 400-meter-deep sea. I kept myself oriented by the hottest point sources of heat within the dome, and the more feeble beacon that was the distant shrouded sun.

Now I could think about my future.

But wouldn't you know, my stubborn brain could only focus on the past. I remembered my youth.

Did you ever realize that the Heisenberg drive promotes specialization? When transport is cheap, it makes sense to import what you can't produce efficiently. And if there's a big market for whatever you do best, then you tend to do it more and more, until pretty soon almost your whole world's doing it. (This applies, of course, to Conservancy and neutral worlds, the worker ants, and not us lazy Commensality grasshoppers, who traffic more in intangibles.)

I was born and grew up in a grain field. The whole damn world was hairy with wheat and oats and other assorted hybrids. There was no such thing as a city. The one other family on the world occupied the antipodes. On clear days you couldn't see forever, but only about as far as the next stalk. It was boring as a stint in a sense-dep tank.

So I said to my brother one day (over the master combine's radio, for he was a thousand miles away), "Buddy, I'm leaving this world when I hit sixteen."

"Yeah, sure," he staticked back. "And where're you going and what're you gonna do?"

Even then, I was developing "peculiar" (by the lights of Buddy) tastes. For instance, I used to study the native locusts for hours and was sorry when we had to kill them, lest they eat our crop.

"The Commensality," I said, yanking on the steering bars to avoid an eroded spot. I squinted against the newly angled sunlight as the big machine responded sluggishly and I wished for illegal mind/machine interface.

"Yuk," Buddy said. "Those extee-lovers. What a creepy idea. You wouldn't really go there, would you?"

"Yes. I'm serious. What's the sense of living on a neutral world if you can't choose one side or the other? And I choose the Commensality."

"You're crazy. The Conservancy is the only way to go."

I said nothing in reply; I was too stunned. It had never occurred to me that Buddy would object. We had never really argued before. Oh, sure, some sibling spats that sprang up and blew over like our world's circumpolar storms; hell, there weren't even *any girls* on the whole planet to fight over! But I could sense that this topic, this tone, was deadly serious, the source of potential great dissension. So, with untypical wisdom, I hid my adolescent certitude with a bland comment.

But Buddy wouldn't let it go. I guess I had really shocked him. After work that day, as we sported in our favorite shady swimming hole, half a world away from home, he kept pressing me on it until I finally asserted myself, saying that I wasn't joking about my desire to join, or at least investigate, the Commensality when I was old enough.

That was when, amid harsh words that stopped just short of blows, he quit talking to me, and I, perforce, to him.

There was one last time before I left when I knew Buddy still cared for me.

I was overseeing a force of meks who were sowing half a continent with winter wheat, up in the northernmost latitudes amenable to cultivation. I was about a klick from my ship when a sudden unseasonable blizzard blew in, whiting out the kilometers of flatness into featureless oblivion. At first I didn't worry. I was dressed for a certain level of exposure, and my ship had a homing beacon.

Which I soon learned I had neglected to flip on.

I started trudging through the howling snow-inferno, heading toward where I thought my ship lay. After covering about five klicks I knew I had guessed wrong. I started tromping in a circle. When I couldn't do that any more, I lay down to die.

I woke up to find Buddy bending over me. (I later learned he had made the instant transition from home to low orbit over my assigned territory, zoomed in on my near-corpse with infrared sensors, then split the atmosphere with a quick descent.)

Through frost-crusted lips I murmured, "Thanks."

And do you know — that lifesaving bastard wouldn't unbend enough even to say, "You're welcome"?

So attaining my majority (age, not size; I still had plenty of growth beyond the two-meter mark I stood at then), I took off, with no good-byes.

At the spaceport, I pondered travel as our age knew it.

First: why spaceships?

The Heisenberg drive works by transferring all an object's inherent dispersed quantum uncertainty into its spatial dimension, at which time it becomes possible to impose new relativistic coordinates on it. Great. So now we can flit directly from the surface of one world to that of another.

Not quite. Unless you want to risk occupying the same coordinates as something/one else, and make the biggest possible bang for your mass. Better pick some vacuum close to your destination.

Which means space. Which means a way to get down from space. Which means spaceships.

But no extravagant takeoffs. Landings, yes. But takeoff consists merely of disappearance and the clap of inrushing air.

Maybe it's pretty extravagant at that.

So at the field I bought my ticket and took my chances.

And found myself entering the portside lock of Babylon, dazed, confused, and utterly bewildered. (The ancients thought jet lag was something!)

When I trod accidentally on the paw of a human-sized feline (I was still wearing my loamy shit-kickers), she turned, hissing, her teeth bare, and said, "Watch it, meat."

I backed off, muttering apologies. The first thing I did was unvelcro my boots and ditch them.

But I kept the semiderogatory, semijoshing name. I was sick of my old one, anyway, and felt I was embarking on a new life. And it proved a fortuitous choice. No one expects much subtlety from a giant named Meat — which pays off when you are trying to separate someone from his valuables.

(And now I've kept my promise to you about explaining my name!)

I called us lazy grasshoppers earlier, and I suppose, compared to others, we are. You can exist in the Commensality without working, thanks to the bounty from the labor of mek units directed by your AOI. But sophonts being sophonts, there is still plenty of enterprise in the Commensality, people providing services and products that others want so as to raise themselves above the lowest common denominator (all in a Commensally aware manner, of course; no rapacious merchant princes need apply).

But such an existence wasn't for me. I had worked harder than these people for all my life. Now I wanted to take it easy. But I wanted to do it in style. So I became a thief. Which turned out to be work, too, but also fun. I surprised myself with my talents in this area. For years now, I had been content and happy.

But then Babylon had made me think.

I came walking upon the shore to a delicate spray of frozen methane that looked like the bridge to Asgard. I kicked it to flinders, without deriving even the satisfaction of feeling it through the quilt.

What did I owe the Commensality? I had fitted into this peculiar *polis* like a hand into a glove. It had saved me from a life of boring drudgery, providing a matrix in which I could become me. And what had I contributed in turn? Oh, sure, I had made individuals happy (and some, no doubt, sad). Anyone can do that. But what had I given to the Commensality as a whole? What were my community responsibilities? Did they involve killing another sophont?

Damn that Babylon! I wanted to cleave the thick roof of his hidden cavern beneath the city and let this frigid sea flow in on him.

I stopped walking, and turned. I was far away from the city now, out on a promontory slapped by the hydrocarbon waves. The thick atmosphere hid the dome from me. The next moment, though, an eddy in the gases developed. (We called these windows mooneyes.) Through the mooneye shone the lights of Babylon, various heat tones of red, orange, yellow, white, and blue, like Captain Nemo's undersea city.

So exotic, so fragile, so mine.

I decided to do what Babylon wanted.

So three days later, why was I still hesitating?

(My nerves were strung so tight that every time I happened to step into Shadow — or Shadow swept over me — I flinched.)

I had passed the time in various pursuits, none of which served to truly allay the nervousness I was feeling.

I conducted a scam or two — nothing too extravagant, just something to keep my hand in and pass the time while I decided how to take out the Conservancy's envoy. One deal had some interesting facets. It involved the infamous Babylon Sisters —

But that's another story altogether.

In any case, my growing credit balance did nothing to soothe my apprehensions. So I turned to sex.

I picked up this stegasoid in the refectory outshowers, and we spent a fun three hours together. But of course, with the way my luck was running, there had to be repercussions. It turned out she was just in from off-planet, somewhere less fastidious than Babylon, and had a bad case of scale mites. You've never known irritation until you've had those active little critters under your overlapping spinal plaques. Took an hour in the infirmary to make 'em surrender.

When I got out of the ward, I went to a bar to waste a few idle hours in muzzy thought.

In the dimness of the bar (bars haven't really changed in centuries, I understand), I got a TAP from Babylon.

[I called to see how matters were progressing,] he sent.

I jolted up in my seat when his words filled my brain. [Oh, fine, fine, Babylon. I'm planning my strategy right this minute.]

[Good. I suggest you pay more attention to the mental condition of your commensals while you procrastinate. Perhaps their malaise may help motivate you.]

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but pretended I did.

[Sure. I'll check it out.]

There was silence then, and I thought Babylon had broken the connection. But he came back with a request.

[Meat, I have a thing I wish you to read. Will you?]

I sent back acceptance, and Babylon squirted me a book.

It took a couple of seconds to absorb and store it, but since it was only a few megabytes of information, I soon had it integrated.

The nature of the information took me by surprise. I had expected something that would help me with my goal. Instead, I got a book of poetry.

It was titled *Crimes Embedded in a Matrix of Semiserious Poems*.

And it was all about me.

[Babylon, I — What's this all about? Who wrote this?]

[I did. But I am not releasing it for general consumption. It would be too likely to incite similar behavior.]

[But why? And why me?]

Babylon sent something wordless akin to a shrug. [I write a lot of poetry in my spare time, and your life seemed dramatically interesting. Not many people talk directly to me, you know, and I have to do something. Also, believe it or not, I actually like you and would be sorry to have to scoop out

your cortex. So I thought I'd share my work with you. I will not hide the fact that I also calculated the action would provoke a slightly higher allegiance from you.]

[Well, thanks, Babylon. I'm touched.] And I was.

[Please think nothing of it. Good-bye, and remember what I said about your compatriots.]

[Good-bye.]

I told you they were idiosyncratic, didn't I?

I got up and left the bar. Serendipity dictated that I would step out into Shadow.

Wincing, I looked up, onto the underside of the Gardens: a flat grey disk marked with colorful graffiti and bordered by dangling plants. I hooked a finger beneath my carcanet and glared at the Gardens, trying to will the whole thing away. I wished I were Prospero and could vanish this particular gorgeous palace into the baseless, uncertain fabric that was the space-time continuum.

Up there, in a rented palace suite, the Conservancy envoy was dispensing his poison, in the form of the Chronicle of Mankind, and Babylon claimed it was generating some sort of psychic illness among the populace.

I set off to find out what he meant.

And this was what I learned.

There was a split growing between the human and the nonhuman citizens of Babylon. Whereas members of all species had always existed in complete harmony, now everyone seemed to be acquiring jagged edges that grated and rasped on each other. I saw it on the streets and in the refectories, in the concert halls and null-gee natatoriums.

The humans were exhibiting traits such as arrogance and impatience and coerciveness. The nonhumans were responding with disdain and stubbornness and frigidity. Godhorses drooped (so dispirited), axolotls frowned (so sad), and slidewhistles scurried by (so silent). I actually saw a fight or three that seemed to have nothing at their bases other than prejudice. (You must understand that there were fights now and then in Babylon during normal times. We're not talking about Utopia, after all, and any sentients might come to blows about certain disagreements. But over negligible physical details — no, never that.)

I knew what the Conservancy planned. Babylon possessed a slight majority of humans. (An accident of statistical distribution. When travel across the universe resembles Brownian motion, you get such occasional clumping.) Pretty soon, when enough of them were infected with the Chronicle, someone would issue a request to the Conservancy to step in and take over the city, on some pretext such as "protecting fellow humans from bodily harm." What could Babylon do then?

The Commensality's strength lay in solidarity. An AOI could only act in the interests of his community. And if that community was fragmented,

where did correct action lie?

Then would begin the riots and bloodshed and retribution for slights real or imagined, the purges and re-education, until Babylon was molded into the Conservancy's image.

Civilization is so tenuous.

My inaction had helped to bring this fateful *Kristallnacht* a step closer. I couldn't let it happen. Not if doing what Babylon wanted was all it would take to stop it.

So I devised a plan.

The Gardens hung in the darkling sky like a fata morgana conjured by a demon wizard. I floated up, air streaming over my bare limbs like liquid methane over a quilt. (But the cold was in me, rather than the air.)

I noticed then that only humans were heading for the Gardens. There wasn't a single other kind of sophont in sight.

It was truly scary, this segregation, even though, by specious (and specifiable) biological assumptions, I was willy-nilly on the side of those who had initiated it. I wondered if this was how my distant ancestors had felt on Truehome, when the calls of a lynch mob echoed through some small North American town.

One perfect ten-point landing later (bare feet comprising an unmodified ten toes), I stood on a wide terrace paved with living substance (the better to roll upon). A hundred meters off stood the palace, central pleasure dome of this aerial trysting place.

I moved off toward it, past glimmering elven lights strung on potted trees.

On the broad steps leading up to the main doors, I TAPPED Babylon.

[You know when to shut off the power?] I asked.

[Of course. 24:00:00 exactly. The witching hour.]

[Ha, ha,] I enunciated with mental precision, just to show I was in no mood for AOI humor. [It's easy for you to joke. You're not about to take someone's life.]

[I stand to lose as much if you fail as you do,] retorted that sententious mass of jelly. Then: [Are you sure you need the whole city shut off?]

[I want utter chaos. That's the only thing that's going to bring the Conservator out of his lair. Can you think of a better way to accomplish it?]

[No. We will follow your plan. Good luck.]

Babylon left my brain.

The city was powered by a monopole furnace. Shutting it off consisted of stopping the flow of protons into that destructive soliton. (Each proton disintegration yielded several gev, and the furnace provided more power than a dozen Babylons could fully use. Fair access to energy *is* equality.)

I had arrived half an hour before midnight. There was one thing I planned to do before confronting the Conservator. I was going to experience the Chronicle so I could know exactly what we were up against.

In the palace, I TAPPED for a floor plan and followed it up a gravshaft to the Conservancy suite.

Before I entered, I stopped to look. I saw a large room crowded with immobile humans, surrounding a golden ovoid set on a pillar.

I stepped into the room —

Oh, those Conservators are clever! Disdaining TAPS as organic mods, they've developed an electronic projective telepathy, a brutal generator of waves that swamp the consciousness. Rather than accept an enhancement that amounts to the slightest possible violation of self, they've substituted mental rape.

I was myself no longer. Instead, I was some anonymous viewpoint character, living out the tale of humanity, as interpreted by the Conservancy. The device must just have cycled, for I was back four million years.

A hominid, I stood on a dusty African plain, puzzling out what to do with a sharp piece of flint. The sun was hot on my back as I finally bent to saw at the zebra carcass at my feet. I gave a grunt of exaltation and swallowed some bloody meat.

After a time in this milieu, things changed. I won't attempt to recount the whole vast tale. Everyone knows it. Through Paleolithic and Neolithic I voyaged. Through Sumer, Ur, Thebes, Babylon (senior), Egypt, Greece, and Rome my consciousness hurtled, shuttled from one representative inhabitant to another. All along, pounding into my brain was the inevitability of it: mankind's long predestined rise from savagery and nescience, his manifest destiny looming huge before him.

Mastery of the universe.

On and on through history I raced, reliving the experiences of hundreds of humans as they subjugated Truehome's flora and fauna and very topography. The Age of Discovery, the Age of Empire, the Age of the Atom, the Age of Solar Exploration, mankind moving from strength to strength, from one glorious conquest to another, culminating in the invention of the Heisenberg drive, when he exploded onto the universe and found —

Other sentients. Beings that aspired to our stature.

Creepy, crawly things, embodiments of a hundred ancestral fears, all of them daring to claim equality, whereas they deserved nothing but enslavement, or second-rate status at best.

At which point mankind split. Into a camp of loyalists and one of traitors. Conservancy versus Commensality. The old true stock against the deliberate mutants and exete-lovers. But there was still time for the traitors to recant, to rejoin the crusade to dominate the galaxy. I could feel sympathy growing in my heart for the twisted cause —

The Chronicle snapped off as abruptly as Babylonian night.

The room went dark, save for feeble bioluminescents.

The Gardens dipped five degrees from horizontal — as the emergency capacitors attempted to handle the huge mass — and started to descend to a

preprogrammed emergency landing site.

Babylon had come through for me.

People began to shriek and scream. They stampeded toward the door and flew out the windows.

I activated my own harness and floated up into the shadows to wait.

Pretty soon the hall was empty. I spent the time trying to cleanse my brain of the filth.

Everything was silent, except for the muted sounds of distress from the city outside. I watched a door that led further into the suite.

Through that door came a fog.

I dropped down like an avenging angel, to stand upon the canted floor.

The fog and I faced off. Sweat slicked the circuit-laced leather straps across my chest.

"Drop your mask," I said. "I want to see what kind of human believes such shit and works for it."

The fog regarded me blankly for a full minute. (That's a long time. You try conducting such a standoff for sixty seconds, and see how your nerves bear up.)

At last came a voice from out the prising mist.

"No."

That was it. I didn't even rate an insult.

The chill from the methane atmosphere seemed to have seeped in past the dome's disabled heaters and infiltrated my heart. From within the mist I thought I detected motion. So, I raised my finger and —

Why did I do it?

He was everything I was not. He juxtaposed text to my texture, sense to my sensuality, being to my becoming, mastery over melding. (And yes, my godhorse lover said he would master me. But that was love, and love is a figurative thing.) The envoy and I represented outerness versus innerness, planets versus moons, restless roving versus complacent sessility, secrets versus openness, law versus anarchy. There was no choice. I had to. So —

— I raised my finger and lanced him with light.

The fog collapsed. I went over to it and groped inside, my arm appearing as if cut off above the wrist. I found the distorter and switched it off.

I never mentioned that my brother and I were twins, did I? So it looked like myself cooling there. Of course, he had no spinal plaques, or laser beneath his fingernail. In fact, he had no weapons at all. I am forced to believe that he was reaching up to shut off the distorter himself when I killed him, although I know for a fact he was too damned stubborn.

"Buddy . . ." I murmured.

And half an hour later was half a universe away, under the light of another sun. An hour more (the reception port was busy), I walked on another world.

Thus began more than two years of flight.

I can't recount all the places I visited. But no matter where I ran, I couldn't outpace the memory of what I had done. Saved a city and destroyed a life, a life connected to mine by inextinguishable bonds. Twisted bonds, to be sure, but bonds nonetheless.

One day I woke up and really paid attention to where I was.

In a one-man ship, two parsecs — the minimal distance for survival — away from a quasar, one of those enigmas that blazed with the radiance of a dozen galaxies.

I was sixteen billion light-years away from Babylon, on the literal edge of the plenum.

It was as far as I could go.

There was nowhere else left to haunt.

So I headed for my birthplace.

I was lying on my back in a field of grain, studying the clouds, when Ace found me.

"We've been monitoring arrivals here since you disappeared," he said. "Babylon had a hunch you'd return sooner or later."

I didn't sit up. "So?"

"Babylon wants you to come back. He says you've earned it."

I considered. "How are you functioning, anyway? You're not in realtime contact with that master manipulator, are you?"

"No. I received a limited imprint and autonomy for this mission. Are you coming back? Babylon has further use for you."

"I'm sure. Well, you can transmit this message."

I recited that ancient children's rhyme.

"And what does that mean?" asked Ace's baffled limited imprint.

"Just deliver it. From one poet to another. Babylon will understand."

Ace seemed to ponder. Then he left.

I adjusted my hands beneath my head into a more comfortable cradle. The earth smelled good. The grain stood tall. The sky was deep. Unless a combine came by, I didn't plan on moving for a while.

Turning my eyes inward, I sought a candle to travel by.

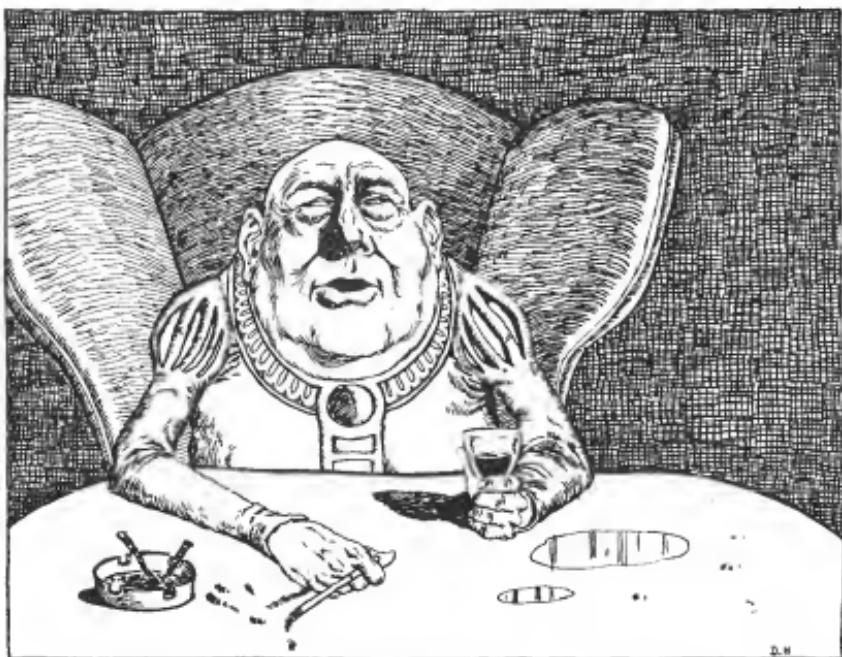


SF LIMERICK

Wolfgang, the time-traveling Rothschild,
As heartless as any old Goth's child,
 Sold worthless prescriptions
 To ancient Egyptians
Who invariably thought he was Thoth's child.

RITE OF PRIVACY

by Arlan Andrews
art: Daniel R. Horne



Arlan Andrews is a Doctor of Science in Mechanical Engineering, who worked for ten years at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico and currently works for AT&T Consumer Products Labs. He and his wife, a former research psychic, live in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Several of his short stories have appeared in Analog, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and Omni. The author's current projects include two cartoon humor books, two novels, and about twenty-five short stories.

The inn was dark, but I could see the fat man sweating, even in the mottled reflection of the old mirror behind the bar where we were sitting. He said, "God, Gary, I don't know how to say this, but I think I'm onto the Secret Masters!"

I didn't respond: calmly I sipped my Scotch and watched Wallace's face collapse in disappointment at my nonreaction. "Gary, did you hear what I said?" His voice, more insistent now, rose in pitch and volume, and we were beginning to attract attention from other dark corners of the establishment, attention I didn't care to have. I put down the shot glass and put an index finger to my lips. Wallace glared an instant and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"It started when I got that do-it-yourself kit for a backyard satellite dish." I chuckled, trying to imagine my ten-thumbed insurance salesman friend assembling something as intricate as a satellite receiving station. In all our college years, a decade ago, he had barely been able to place a long-play album on a record player. He didn't notice my amusement. "Took me three months altogether" — verified my hunch, I thought — "and like to never have got it to work. None of the diagnostics panned out, not a damned channel came in that was supposed to, and my old lady was getting really pissed at the money spent for nothing." Had to give him credit, Wallace was persistent; don't know that even I could function with that large trollish wife of his bitching over my shoulder.

"Decoder EPROM turned out to be the problem." I was impressed; most people don't even know about Erasable Programmable Read-Only Memory chip technology that is at the heart of the satellite decoding system. I suspected my old college friend had acquired quite a bit of knowledge in the years since I'd seen him last. He'd always operated at genius level, and I had often wondered why he'd gone into Business instead of staying in Engineering, my own career route. Maybe for money? My data-base search had shown that he was worth a ton of money, even before his satellite dish project.

"Tell me more," I said, motioning to the barkeep for another round of doubles. Wallace was talking and I wanted to hear more. Everything. "What next?"

Wallace must have picked up on the tone of my voice. His eyes jerked left and right, trying to find bad guys in the dark. I smiled and shook my head. "Just me, Wallace. I'm the only spook here. Go on, what happened?"

"I decided to re-program an EPROM myself, on my home personal computer. I hooked up an ultraviolet 'PROM burner' from Audio Shack and played around with various coding techniques." At my obvious reaction, it was his time to smile. "Simple, Gary, really it was. Hell, the Shack has manuals on how to do purt' near everything with decoders and crypto." I nodded. So that's how it had started, Wallace's dangerous road to ultimate wealth and power.

"Anyhow, kicked around the crypto codes I had used when I was a draftee in the National Security Agency and during my stint as a co-op programmer at Sandia National Laboratories. Used some old Developing Intelligence para-programs. Duck soup after that, old pal." Swallowing a full shot of straight Scotch, he tried to assume a stance of sophistication and fearlessness. It didn't work. He shook too much. His story did ring a bell, but the available bio data base had skimmed over his year in the Army and his six months in New Mexico before he'd changed college majors. I'd met him shortly after that. It was all adding up.

"Whew, strong stuff, Gary," he commented, his voice a bit stronger now, whether from the lubrication of the liquid or the influence of the alcohol I couldn't tell. I just nodded and continued to sip. Around the bar the faces in dark corners were paying us no mind. I was glad of that fact and hoped Wallace would keep his voice low.

"I aimed the finished arrangement at the coordinates where the new Nip-Star satellite was supposed to be, cranked up the gain, and sat back to watch. Wanted to pick up some of those Oriental art films, the pornos, you know? Imagine my surprise, Gary, just imagine, when I started watching tomorrow's news!" I gulped and nearly choked on my drink. Wallace laughed.

He quickly filled me in on the fantastic channel he had been watching the last three months. One hundred-per-cent accurate prognostications of stock market trends, for example. Almost perfect predictions of elections, coups, and power grabs around the world. Even the outbreaks of strikes and wars! "Totally awesome, Gary. At first I thought it was some kind of religious program, then maybe a science-fiction story, like *The Time Machine*, you know?" I shook my head. Speculation was not in my line of business; engineering principles are immutable, so good engineers don't have opinions. *Just the facts, ma'am!*

"But it suddenly dawned on me that it wasn't the future I was watching, but some kind of secret power structure, here and now! The TV programs were slickly produced and featured some well-known personalities in all fields — politicians and bankers and military of all countries, lawyers, some academics, one or two well-known writers" — I whistled at the science-fiction editor he mentioned; I wouldn't have believed it once — "and a bunch of other people I never heard of." I wasn't looking at him anymore, but stared straight across the bar into the mirror. Wallace caught my eyes in the reflections. "Hell, you know all of this. You got the tape I sent you, didn't you? That's why you're here, isn't it?"

I spoke slowly. "Wallace, old friend, the answers to your questions are yes and no." His mirror image frowned and lifted another full glass of booze and gulped it down. I turned and spoke directly to him, waiting a bit until he shook off the burning esophageal experience. "You believed what you saw, didn't you, old friend?"

He nodded. "Hell, Gary, after a month of checking those predictions

against newspapers, I decided I was onto something, so I cashed in." Aptly put, I thought.

"You certainly did, Wallace. Rolled your hundred and fifty thousand in savings up to — what was it, seven million? Not bad for two months, was it?"

His mouth dropped open. "I never told you about that, how —?" He smiled. "Because you're CIA, right? Got access to everybody's files?"

"Yes and no, Wallace. You called me because you know I've been a CIA communications engineer since graduation. You wanted to know how much the CIA knew about your Secret Masters. Maybe protect you if you were attracting too much attention. Am I right?"

"That's about it, Gary. So you boys know all about the NipStar channel and the decoding and everything? Gonna sic the IRS on me?" I shook my head and sighed. He smiled and shrugged and pulled out a small plastic bag with a dark object inside it. "I'm completely clean. No insider trading, no SEC. Even the IRS can't touch me. I carry the chip with me at all times." Tapping the bag, he said, "Electrostatically protected so it won't be zapped and get its memory wiped out." I grimaced anew at that statement. Damn if he wasn't just too, too brilliant!

I motioned toward the darkness and four large but well-dressed goons came and surrounded my old friend. The barkeep pretended not to notice. Wallace protested, "Gary, you said you didn't care! The CIA didn't care! What's going on?"

"Wallace, old pal, the CIA and the IRS don't know and don't care, except for a very, very few. But I also have another job, working for some people who care very much." I pocketed the plastic bag with the EPROM chip and led the way out of the bar with a strangely quiet Wallace and four goons following.

"Are they going to —?"

I shook my head. "You won't feel a thing, I promise. And you'll be happier than you've ever known. I promise that too, Wallace. That's why I took this assignment. You are — you *were* — my friend. Good-bye."

"But — don't I even get to know what the charges are? Who the people behind this are? The Secret Masters of the World, is that it?" The goons were shoving him into a long black limo, and only his panicky face showed before the door shut.

"Close enough, Wallace. For you, entirely *too* close." The door slammed and the limo sped away into darkness. I sighed. There had been worse assignments, very much worse. But this time I had been told that Wallace would only suffer a partial mind wipe, much like a small induced stroke, losing only the memories of the last ten years or so. Otherwise no violence. My bosses let me have that small favor. I had also requested that his wife disappear both from his memory and from his life. *Compensation*, I thought. *It all evens out.*

My bosses are not unnecessarily cruel, or even ungrateful. I had been able to save my friend's life, but they insisted on absolute protection of their privacy. I mean, hell, you can't let just *anybody* have unauthorized access to *Cabal TV!*



DISOBEDIENCE IN THE CRYO-CHAMBER...

YOUNG MAN!
I THOUGHT I TOLD
YOU TO GO TO SLEEP
HALF A' CENTURY
AGO!

AW GEE
MA...



PANDERING, EVASIONS, AND TARGET PRACTICE

by Judith Tarr and Susan Shwartz
with Lillian Stewart Carl and Katharine Kerr

ESSAY

"I hate fantasy."

— Alfred Bester

In the January 1988 *Amazing Stories*, in an article titled "Pandering and Evasions," Gregory Benford makes a number of points about what is wrong with the current crop of science fiction, fantasy, and everything between. Good points, strong points, points well worth pondering. His conclusion is a rallying cry which the whole field, readers and writers alike, should take to heart: "Being rigorous and creative is a high cause we can all join in. Let's do it."

Let's do it, indeed. But how shall we do it?

Not by beginning with the attitude which underlies, informs, and skews Benford's argument. That same attitude which sums up (and dismisses) fantasy as "the literature of magic, elves, dragons, and unicorns" (Thomas A. Easton, "Prostitutes, Markets, and Quality," *SFWA Bulletin* (Fall, 1987), p. 24); that attitude which leads Benford to speak of "Fantasy as Pollution" of the pure streams of science fiction. We could make a very good and equally convincing case that science fiction is polluting the pure stream of fantasy with its robots, its rocket ships, and its appalling prose. The fact that neither case in itself is correct is beside the point. Argument from false or misleading assumptions is an old trick of classical rhetoric, as any high-school debater knows.

Defining the Assumptions

Benford's assumptions, as we read them and as Benford himself expresses them, proceed as follows:

1. *We are seeing a lot of books these days about either faerie glamour or technoenemy. Such books pander to our blind spots and help us to evade human realities. There are so many of them in large part because*

2. *It's harder to write good science fiction than good fantasy, and, by extension, easier to write bad fantasy than bad SF.* Benford is not against fantasy *qua* fantasy, but against its promiscuous intrusion into hard science fiction. He even cites Nancy Springer, whose fantasy is superb, to show that he is an equal-opportunity critic. The problem with bad fantasy — and in Benford's argument, despite the disclaimer, that appears to be any fantasy — is that

3. *"Fantasy fearlessly faces the past. . . . Fantasy springs from the wistful hope that we can impose on the world a human program. . . . Fantasy is often the literary fossil of vitalism. . . . Fantasy is deeply conservative and clings to the bourgeois orthodoxy of narrative."* In a subsequent passage, such narrative is called "nineteenth-century," and by implication, a relic of outworn Victoriana — by definition, a Bad Thing. Likewise, the genre is dominated by the age-old ogre of Northern Cultural Imperialism, to which a good South-

erner (as Benford professes to be) cannot help but object. The effect on science fiction is

4. *Fantasy as pollution.* Your bad stuff (by definition, not rigorous but cozy, cutesy, backward-looking, and timid) is corrupting our good stuff. As to why such an abomination continues not only to exist but to thrive, it seems that

5. *Fantasy and America as Empire represent deep needs in the reading public.* The huddled masses devour this literary junk food by the ton, and something must be done about it. Benford's answer is the rally to the flag of rigor and creativity.

Questioning the Assumptions

1. *Fantasy is taking over the marketplace.* First, some definitions. Here is Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary on fantasy in general: "The free play of creative imagination." Science fiction, in turn, is defined as "fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals; broadly: literary fantasy including a scientific factor as an essential orienting component." We would define genre fantasy, simplistically, as literature in which magic works, as opposed to science fiction, in which science is the operative principle. We can separate, say, gentle fantasy (the sub-subgenre which tends really to be about elves and unicorns) and hard science fiction, but both remain subgenres of speculative fiction — and speculative fiction, broadly defined, is literary fantasy, the exercise of the creative imagination in literature. This is the logic of the bookstore shelf, the reason why the elves and the starships are lumped together without apparent distinction; and the elves seem to be gaining, to Benford's dismay. Unicorns and

dragons are taking up space which could better be occupied by robots and rocket ships. Science-fiction writers, Benford among them, see their positions in the bookshops whittled away by fantasy; therefore they conceive a "mission," to save the readers from their own pernicious impulses. But this mission is nothing more noble than an attempt to preserve their own share of the market. What Benford does not point out is that science-fiction novels still outnumber genre fantasy novels — according to *Locus* (February, 1988, p. 31), in 1987 there were 298 new science-fiction novels published, and 256 new fantasy novels (we leave out horror, which is not at issue here — and which in fact, in *Locus'* analysis, seems to be increasing faster than either fantasy or science fiction). Numbers of course are no index of quality, but if Sturgeon's Law can be taken to apply equally to both subgenres, the amount of science-fictional crap still exceeds the amount of fantasy crap. The problem lies less with the genres themselves than with the people who judge these genres.

2. *Toward a hierarchy of being.* A large number of readers, writers, and reviewers — Benford among them — resist strenuously the conception of science fiction as a subset of literary fantasy. They accept with little more grace the argument that genre fantasy and science fiction are elements not of a hierarchy but of a continuum. Fantasy (and the writer thereof) is regarded as a distinct second best. In the scheme of the world as represented in the genre, the pinnacle is the writer of hard science fiction; he shares it, or is told that he is sharing it, with the practitioner of high literature. The cutting edge (New Wave, Newer Wave, Neuromancers/Cyberpunks, or any other vociferous fad) does its best to

work its way to the top, while insisting that it, in truth, *is* the top. Then there are varying degrees of "soft" science fiction, space opera, soap opera set in space, space romance, galactic empires, etc. Then, at last, there is fantasy. Those who write both fantasy and science fiction, or those who become fantasists after publishing some science fiction, sit a little higher on the mountain than those who write only fantasy. This is the assumption which underlies Benford's discussion of relative ease and difficulty. What is harder to write (i.e., science fiction) is better to write, and what is easier to write (i.e., fantasy) is by definition doubly contemptible. Why is it necessary to establish a hierarchy of difficulty, and an equation of that particular hierarchy with writing skill?

Fantasy is, in this context, *only* fantasy. Fantasy is the literature of the easy way out: dreamy wish fulfillment, rife with adorable unicorns and cuddly dragons and cardboard-cutout heroes and villains. Its watchword is comfort, as Benford contends. Nothing really bad ever happens; it's all just a dream, or a story, or a situation easily resolved by the advent, in the nick of time, of some new magical miracle. Its banner and its symbol are the infamous Tolkien clone. We all know these creatures; no one seems actually to write them, and heaven forbid that anyone should *read* them, the New York Times Best Seller List notwithstanding.

Benford finds even Tolkien himself too comfortable for comfort. The books which we have read and reread seem not to have been those which Benford has glanced at. They are flawed, certainly, but brilliantly flawed, in world-building that runs from Creation to Destruction, and ultimately promises nothing but an

evening's peace by the fire — before the next fall of the shadow. To read that as comfort is to blind oneself to the entire complex underpinnings of the text. Such underpinnings support the world of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*, where pain is real, and death is bleak and terrible; likewise Joy Chant's *Red Moon and Black Mountain*, with its starkly antifeminist undertones and its royal sacrifice.

These are, of course, good books, books which stand above the common crowd, books for which Benford himself professes respect. No reviewer worth his slot tries to deny that science fiction no less than fantasy adheres to Sturgeon's famous Law. For every tedious fantasy trilogy, an endless future-history series. For cute unicorns, cute robots. For great-thewed heroes and wise wizards, brawling starship captains and wise aliens. The error lies in blaming the flaws of science fiction on the "intrusion" of fantasy — science fiction defined with rigorous precision as hard-science science fiction, but fantasy defined as anything the critic happens to disapprove of: wish fulfillment, irrational illogic, inconsistency, inaccuracy, bad plotting, poor characterization, escapism, anachronism, imperialism, and the common cold. Science fiction, by this logic, is inherently superior. Fantasy is inherently inferior. Good science fiction is infinitely harder to write than good fantasy: it requires careful extrapolation and meticulous scientific thinking. Fantasy, one just sits down and makes up as one goes along, secure in the reader's suspension of disbelief, liberated from the constraints of the laws of physics. By the same token, bad fantasy is infinitely simpler to write than bad science fiction because, as Nancy Springer has observed (and Benford

agrees), the furniture is much easier to obtain: a mishmash of half-baked liberal education, diluted myth and archetype, yea-verily-and-forsooth style, and plots familiar from countless fairy tales and Saturday morning cartoons. Science fiction, by this argument, requires a bit more: a certain knowledge, however rudimentary, of scientific thinking.

In other words, science fiction requires a slightly more advanced order of being. Scientists howl in real and atavistic agony when we draw from this assumption a certain inevitable analogy: Science in our era occupies the place once held by the medieval Church. In the scientific establishment as in the Church, there is a hierarchy of believers, with the ignorant masses wallowing in superstition beneath them, and at the summit, the master of theology. Through the reasoning of the theologians, the Pope and the bishops — the applied as opposed to the theoretical scientists — discover and administer the laws of God and of the universe. There is an evolved dogma; a conception of orthodoxy with its dark converse, heresy; and an evolved language of discourse easily accessible only to the educated elite. The bright adolescent, confronted with this powerful and, to his uneducated eyes, arcane structure, finds it much simpler and less intellectually strenuous to retreat into superstition — into inept fantasy.

3. *Fantasy as escapism*. There is a fundamental flaw in such reasoning. That flaw is the contempt for, and the willing ignorance of, what fantasy is and can be. It is, most simply put, a refusal to grant fantasy any genuine rigor or relevance. Fantasy is old, outworn, outmoded. Fantasy is escapism. Fantasy represents all the worst of "medieval" in contrast to "modern"

thinking.

This attitude in itself represents the converse of the William Morris romanticism which Benford deplores. It is, in fact, a much older conception, born in the Italian Renaissance and perpetuated by scholars and historians, but out of fashion outside of high-school classrooms for the past half-century: the conviction that our age is the culmination of all the ages, that the past is dead and therefore irrelevant, and that we must turn our backs resolutely on history and face the future. Since a phrase that is often repeated tends to lose its force, let us redefine Santayana's famous dictum about the past: Those who don't understand history don't know what the hell is going on (and are therefore prone to repeat the same old mistakes).

Benford and other writers and critics of science fiction share a common delusion about the past, namely that it is not only desirable but possible to win free of it. We could label this delusion typically American if it were not that Americans share it with their ideological opposites, the Soviets — who also produce a significant amount of science fiction. The Soviets romanticize breaking free of the past in their catch phrase "glorious revolution," Americans theirs with "a fresh start," but the underlying assumption is the same, that simply by being rational (defined as thinking scientifically) and mastering the power of the human will, we can — and indeed must — leave behind eons of physical evolution and millennia of cultural development. A corollary to this idea is the belief that if only mankind would be rational and leave human emotion behind, it could build a paradise on earth and among the stars.

As with most dreams, the core of this idea is ancient. We suspect that

not only science-fiction writers but scientists and laypeople who adhere to this conception attack the study of history as vigorously as they do, out of the realization that even a superficial acquaintance with the facts would threaten first their belief that their vision is completely new, and second their faith that it can succeed. The roads of history are littered with the remains of dead utopias and the corpses of rational visions. The Age of Enlightenment was the age of burning witches. The Renaissance, in condemning the Middle Ages, exceeded its worst excesses.

In arguing against fantasy's antiquated view of the world, Benford argues also against fantasy's narrative structure and its style. He conveniently forgets that that same nineteenth century which he denigrates produced the work of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Victor Hugo, and Emile Zola, and was the foundation of the modern Russian, American (both north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line), and Latin American novel. Again, his willful turning away from the past results in a drastic and outmoded misperception of that past.

And he omits one crucial point. Practitioners of hard science fiction are no more avant-garde and no less "bourgeois" in their techniques than the most conservative of fantasists. In fact, the only writers in the field at the moment who attempt an innovative narrative style as a matter of course and of principle are the loudly vocal and often denigrated Cyberpunks. Even they derive their style essentially from the experimental writers of the period immediately following World War II: William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Djuna Barnes, and their compatriots. The irony here is that these writers were militant anti-

rationalists who believed in the absurdity, not the explicability, of life and the universe. The real innovators of twentieth-century literature — James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett — based their fictions on the conception that all experience is essentially fragmented and uncommunicable, that there is no such thing as absolute truth or absolute knowledge, that, ultimately, each person is trapped in a total subjectivity that renders science meaningless. Is this a more suitable narrative technique for science fiction than the nineteenth-century mode which Benford scorns? Its very unsuitability explains what so vexes the proponents of Cyberpunk, that so many other science-fiction writers (the hard-science writers notable among them) will not work in nonconventional styles. Style is, if anything, antithetical to the nature of hard science fiction (or so its practitioners and its critics persist in contending); and true literary style is a matter of personal vision, not of fads in word play. Science fiction's conservative narrative outlook is not the "fault" of fantasy, but a characteristic of the subgenre itself.

That is probably as it should be. After all, the experiments of "up-market" writers in style and narrative have alienated many readers from their works, to their commercial detriment (if not to their detriment among the pundits of the *New York Review of Books*), and have given rise to frequent and heated proclamations of the death of the novel, much as intellectuals (often the same intellectuals) used to proclaim the death of God. Moreover, by declaring that "the dryly comic surrealism of Borges, Calvino, Barthelme, and others seems very nearly science-fictional at times, but fantasy cannot at root share this,"

Benford is merely creating a new version of the old mainstream argument that "if it's good, it can't be science fiction."

4. *Fantasy as pollution*. This is by no means a defense of bad fantasy, feel-good fantasy, sugar-coated faerie-tale fantasy, or any other whitewashed depiction of the misty past. Such writing represents the other side of the view put forth by Benford and held by altogether too many of his colleagues. It represents a reduction of fantasy to its lowest common denominator — exactly the same reduction perpetrated by the mainstream on science fiction. Gregory Benford castigating "Fantasy as Pollution" is using the same method of argument as Margaret Atwood in denying that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be science fiction: it has no robots or rocket ships. Both judge an entire genre on the basis of its worst representatives. Atwood at least has the excuse that she is an outsider. Benford, in weeding out the black sheep among his brothers, attacks the entire tribe to which they belong, as if the genetic heritage common to them all can somehow be separated from his own, superior stock, and any lingering deficiencies blamed not on the common heritage but on certain less savory individuals among his cousins.

5. *Solving the problem: We need our fantasy fix, we need rigor, we need creativity*. Benford's laying of the flaws of science fiction at fantasy's feet is not logic. It is the adoption and perpetuation of stereotypes. Nor are these figurative tribesmen of genre fantasy the ignorant, half-witted backwoods-men he seems to think them. Some have even been to college. Their chosen forms of fantasy know the meaning of rigor, and even of creativity.

What does Benford mean by these two stirring words? Does he mean

"the good, technical stuff that I write as opposed to the sentimental, backward-looking stuff that you write"? Rigorous and creative — a close reading of Benford's text reveals that rigorous and creative fiction is realistic fiction that may transcend nineteenth-century narrative, that plays by the rules of extrapolation of technology and science, and that contemplates a future that is "urban, diverse, technology-driven, and packed with ambiguities." We agree that good writing about such a future is likely to produce one variety of good book. We will not, however, agree with what appears to be Benford's corollary, that any other type of science fiction or fantasy is, by definition, "rural, simple, monothematic, irrational, and primitive," or that it may represent some sort of post-Abolitionist iron dream of America as Empire.

To our way of thinking, Benford's definition is restrictive in part because of its condemnation of "futures that peer backward into a past that is rural, simple, monothematic," etc. Note the telling use of the word "peer," which neatly tags science fiction tarred with the fantasy brush as myopic, circumscribed, and probably antitechnological. The definition is restrictive because of its assumptions about the past, and these assumptions, as we have shown, are themselves myopic and inaccurate. It is possible, despite polemics against comfy-cozy feudalism, actually to learn from the past. And it is possible to deal with the past in a manner that blends history, religion, art, literature, and — yes — technology. After all, technology need not and cannot always consist of fusion reactors, ramscoop engines, terraforming equipment, or computers. It can be, and has been, as humble a thing as the stirrup or the horsecollar, the

development of iron weapons, movable type, or antisepsis.

And fantasy can, and does, deal with these matters — and with many others of the same general nature. Fantasy no less than science fiction can avail itself of a potent creative rigor, can concern itself with the ways in which technology and culture define one another, can move beyond simple mechanics to an exploration of the landscape of the human psyche. In that context, science fiction, with its fixation on scientific orthodoxy, its resolute denial of history, and its subordination of human nature to the power of postindustrial technology, could be regarded as a sorely limited, nearsighted, ultimately sterile formula — a dead end. We certainly should not like to do so, despite a certain human temptation to give as good as we get. We prefer to speak in defense of fantasy; to contend that it, at least as much as science fiction, encompasses Benford's virtues (defined more broadly, however) of rigor and creativity.

Tolkien had both in abundance; he built a world on a foundation of advanced linguistic study, evolved its history out of a broad spectrum of early Western and especially Northwest European literature, and peopled it with cultures both richer and more varied than one may find in the vast majority of science fiction. The best Arthurians — Parke Godwin most recently — have gone deep in exploration of characters and motives and ethics, while remaining within the structure of the Matter of Britain. Gene Wolfe's *Soldier of the Mist* is a brilliant example of what can be done by an author with the depth and the erudition to write with full acceptance of the beliefs and attitudes of a particular historical period, so that gods become real, and magic works, and

humans do the best they can between them. Others, less drastic or daring but no less rigorous, have applied advanced study of history to a subgenre which seems to us to represent an analogue of hard science fiction: hardcore historical fantasy, or, as Harry Turtledove has christened it, Historical Realism. Turtledove himself, a Ph.D. in Byzantine history, has applied his studies with "science-fictional" rigor and precision in his *Videssos Cycle*. Poul and Karen Anderson recreate the dying days of the Roman Empire in their monumental tetralogy, *The King of Ys*. John M. Ford's brilliant *The Dragon Waiting* invents an entire alternate world, peoples it with characters both historical and anhistorical, and centers its plot on the uses and abuses of the high learned magic of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In broader and more traditional fields of fantasy, authors of both learning and talent have found fresh ways to retell ancient myths, ways which speak to the contemporary mind: Evangeline Walton's reconstructions of the *Mabinogion*, the imagined China of Barry Hughart's *Bridge of Birds*, the world of the Arabian Nights as explored anew by a gathering of writers from Larry Niven to Gene Wolfe to Tanith Lee in the recent and forthcoming collections of *Arabesques*.

None of these authors goes for the simple solution, or the easy way out, or the magical trick that saves everything, every time. Evil is not evil. Just Because; logic does not go by the boards, nor does consistency, or historical accuracy, or the complexity of human nature. These writers, and many like them, have something to say, and each does his or her best to say it fully, cogently, and without resort to tired formula. Many of them indeed, Poul Anderson not least, have

won places for themselves among the masters of science fiction.

That these authors have chosen to say what they have to say in fantasy, where magic works and the human soul is the focus, and not in science fiction, where the laws of physics are (or should be) incontrovertible, is not a judgement of value or validity, but a choice of genre and of form. There is no conspiracy among writers and publishers of fantasy to turn readers from the paths of scientific or literary righteousness. Readers, faced with the bastard children of science — industrial pollution, the arms race, the malevolent computers of the Infernal Revenue Service — are hungry for reassurance not that the world is "comfy" and cute, but that it is comprehensible, that there is a place for man in it, and that each person has a role to play upon its stage. The role of science fiction is to make the often terrifying aspects of today's science and technology more accessible. The role of fantasy is to root today's swiftly changing world in eternal verities.

Again, it is a continuum, and a necessary partnership, not either a hierarchy or a battle for supremacy.

None of those writers who choose to express their ideas in fantasy choose to do so, we can hope, out of laziness or incapacity or failure of nerve. All too often, defenders of science fiction seem to castigate fantasy because of its relative freedom — the full spectrum of the human imagination, as opposed to the rigidly restricted field of scientific orthodoxy. Yes, that freedom invites abuse. But it is no less an abuse to judge the entire genre on that basis, to express public and frequent fear that such abuses will "pollute" one's own pure subgenre, and to take refuge from mainstream criticism in the conviction that, well, we have our bad

'uns, but we know where there's worse. Bad writing is bad writing, whatever its form. Good writing is good writing, regardless of its label. "My genre is better than your genre," as an argument, belongs in the sandbox with the rest of the toys. "Your genre is getting my genre dirty" is not only a form of special pleading, it is an avoidance of responsibility: a shifting of blame from one's own incapacities to those of someone else.

Build Bridges, Not Walls

This is a terrible thing which we have done to Dr. Benford's essay: we have subjected it to exactly the type of excruciating examination which is so dear to that *bête noire* of the good science-fiction enthusiast, the literary critic. Benford's article stands up well; it is a fine, controversial piece. If it fails to convince us to repudiate fantasy and concentrate on hard science fiction, still it has succeeded in its overt and far more enlightened intention: to stimulate thought and debate.

Unfortunately, for all its erudition and intellect and integrity, Benford's argument fails in one fundamental respect: its builds no bridges between the provinces of this wide country that is our genre. It only serves to build more and higher walls; and, for all Benford's skill, it does so in highly predictable ways. It is fashionable in prestigious graduate schools for students of the humanities to look with scorn on the tech-types. This is hardly an intelligent attitude; it does nothing for the ideal of the community of scholars, but it is prevalent and pernicious. Engineers and scientists, in their turn, find the same gratification in looking down on what they call "artsies."

As a rule, to be sure, the best and the brightest in each camp can discern

the possibilities inherent in the other, and find there a common ground. C. P. Snow in "The Two Cultures" expresses this view with rare perception. Unfortunately, the actual practice of synthesis is as rare as Snow's understanding of it. How many humanities specialists can explain the Second Law of Thermodynamics? How many physicists can explain Grimm's Law? What would the world be like if each party was literate in the other's basic assumptions? (Please, don't write us with either explanation. If you can make those explanations, you are a bridge-builder and you have better things to do with your time.)

By setting up a false dichotomy — despite such strategic courtesies as "I have always respected fantasy's greatest works" — "Pandering and Evasions" sets up a situation which prevents such building of bridges. The artsies and the techies face off once more, for yet another fruitless confrontation.

Aside, of course, from the pleasure of winning an argument, why should any of us argue at all? It's good old primate behavior with a civilized twist: a question of turf (fantasy is polluting our river), and a question of market share (fantasy is taking over our shelf space). And, as Benford implies, it is a question of the mainstream critical recognition which we all pretend to despise. My stuff is better than your stuff, but reviewers for the *New York Times Book Review* (or the *New York Review of Books*, or the *Times Literary Supplement*) who see your stuff think that mine is just as bad, and therefore

won't review it.

As we reread Benford and Easton, we realize that we really do not need the mainstream to transform fantasy and science fiction into a shooting range. We don't need Margaret Atwood's coy disavowal of genre. We don't need Luc Sante of *Harper's Magazine* and the rest of his trigger-happy tribe, which so delights in taking aim at science fiction that, if we had not existed, surely they would have had to invent us.

Certainly we can divide into factions, each abusing the other as pandering, evasion, pollution, or arrant nonsense, without benefit of the mainstream with its prestigious hardcover houses, its even more prestigious critical organs, its scholarly studies, and its syllabi. But, if that prevents us from writing the best stories possible, and fighting to gain them the recognition they deserve, what have we accomplished?

Let us look fearlessly into the past long enough to quote Ben Franklin. If we do not all hang together, assuredly, we will all hang separately. Let us acknowledge that we share common purposes; let us pursue them with rigor and creativity. Let us look clear-eyed on our successes as well as our failures. Let us not, in the process, excuse those failures by citing "encroachment" from another corner of the sandbox. There is quite enough for all of us to do, without this endless, pointless, and ultimately useless game of King of the Mountain.

THE GOOD DOCTOR

by Robert J. Sawyer
art: Nicola Cuti



The author lives with his wife, Carolyn, in a suburb of Toronto. There, he makes most of his living writing feature magazine articles, often about computers. He is also The Canadian Encyclopedia's authority on science fiction, and in collaboration with fellow Amazing® Stories contributor T. S. Huff, he frequently leads professional-development seminars on science fiction and fantasy for librarians.

His SF stories have appeared in The Village Voice, 100 Great Fantasy Short Short Stories (edited by Asimov, Carr, and Greenberg), Story Cards, and Amazing Stories ("Uphill Climb," March 1987; "Golden Fleece," September 1988).

"There's a new patient here to see you, Dr. Butcher," said the pleasant contralto over the intercom.

Shaggy eyebrows above craggy countenance lifted in mild irritation. "Well, what is it? Human? Dolphin? Quint?"

"It's a Kogloo, sir."

"A Kogloo! Send it in." A Kogloo on Earth was about as rare as a current magazine chip in Butcher's waiting room. The hunched human ushered the barrel-shaped being into his office. "What can I do for you?"

"Doctor, doctor, I is terrible problem." The words were thick, but, to its credit, the Kogloo was working without a translator. "I try to writing skience fiction, no?"

"So?"

"So this!" The Kogloo upended a satchel over Butcher's already cluttered desk. Countless cards and pieces of paper cascaded out.

"Rejection slips?" Butcher grunted. He had his own collection from *The Lancet*. "Unless you've got writer's cramp, I can't help you."

"No, please." The alien's tripartite mandible popped the p. "I write good, in mine own language, no?" Butcher had heard that the big four SF chips had Kogloonian editions now. "I send novella to *Amazing* — they love it! They even buy! *Effing SF* is eating out of my foot. *Analog*, the same. But that other one —!" The Kogloo waved its antennae expressively. "Bah, they no want."

"Look," said Butcher, annoyance honing his words. "I'm an M.D., a medical doctor. This is out of —"

"Please! I decide to come to Earth. I want to meet man whose name is in the title, no? But trip out is very, very bad!"

"Now see here!" Dr. Butcher's doctor had warned him to watch his blood pressure. "I'm a busy man —"

"But here is even worse! Flyer, boat, tram, train tube, is all the same."

Butcher exploded. "This is not a travel agency! I'm a doctor, understand? A doctor! I treat sickness and injuries. Now, unless you have a medical problem —"

The Kogloo bashed its forehead on the desk top in the traditional gesture of excitement. "Yes! Yes! Everytime I get into vehicle, I very uncomfortable. I embarrass myself and anger driver." A sigh. "I afraid I never get to where that title man is."

Butcher's eyes widened in comprehension. "I think I see what's causing your troubles. . . ."

The Kogloo nodded vigorously. "Doctor, I sick as I move!"



WODAN'S ARMY

by Lloyd Arthur Eshbach

art: Robert J. Pasternak

Lloyd Arthur Eshbach has been an SF enthusiast, writer, and publisher for most of his life. His first story sale, "A Voice from the Ether," originally appeared in Amazing® Stories in 1931; it has recently been anthologized in Amazing™ Science Fiction Anthology: The Wonder Years 1926-1935 (TSR, Inc., 1987). He completed an unfinished E. E. Smith novel, Subspace Encounter (Berkley, 1983), left in a fragmentary state at Smith's death in 1965. Currently, he is in the midst of completing a four-book fantasy series for Del Rey Books: The Land Beyond the Gate (1984), The Armlet of the Gods (1986), The Sorceress of Scath (1988), and The Secret of the the Scroll.

With a furtive glance behind him to be certain he was unobserved, Luther Schlacht darted into the deeper shadows of the alleyway that led off dingy Schleierstrasse. He halted briefly to let his eyes adjust to the greater darkness, taking shallow breaths in a vain attempt to avoid inhaling the sour stench that rose from the stagnant, acidic fluid filling the pocked surface of the narrow way. With eyes adjusted, he moved stealthily along the rough wall, feeling his way, counting his carefully measured steps.

At one hundred nine he halted, hands groping, finding a knob in a scarred wooden door. It turned, the door opening silently on well-oiled hinges, closing quietly behind him. He moved ahead in utter darkness, met another solid barrier, rapped twice, and waited. The rush of cooler air alone revealed the opening of the door, and an intense, narrow light flashed blindingly in his eyes.

"Valhalla!" Quickly, he uttered the password.

A hand grasped his arm, and the guard closed and locked the door behind him. "You are the last, Komrad Schlacht. You are late. Were there problems?"

Schlacht answered quietly as they moved along a dark corridor toward a dimly lighted cellar room from which came a hubbub of voices.

"My regrets, Hans. That pig-dog Kleinert gave me an extra work detail. I had to come without supper. Wodan speed the day when we need no longer hide."

As they entered the room, the Leader moved to the front, and conversation died. They found seats on one of the long backless benches among the two-score men and women already there. Intently, they watched the tall, military figure, the only one among them in uniform, impressive even in the



flickering light of the candles. Suddenly, he stiffened, his heels clicking together.

"Ach-tung!" he snapped, and as one, all sprang erect. The Leader turned to face the front wall where four candles illuminated a tattered lithograph of a black-haired man with a shapeless black mustache. As one, every right arm thrust up and out in salute, and from forty throats came the single word: "Heil!"

They held their position for several seconds, then simultaneously their hands dropped to their sides and they resumed their seats.

Luther Schlacht tried to concentrate on what the Leader said, but he had heard it so often that it blurred into so much sound. It was repeated at each meeting for new recruits just introduced into their ranks. It was the condensed history of two wars, of the first Leader who had come to power during that conflict, the ordained Saviour of the Aryan race, who through betrayal had been sacrificed. Of the true religion, the worship of the Elder Gods, that had had its reawakening during that war. Then the War of the Hammer and Sickle with its sudden, unbelievable end, with the Greater Berlin Wall now enclosing a great prison camp holding those who had fought on the losing side. Of the slow re-creating, forbidden and clandestine, of the Army of Wodan.

The Leader concluded his memorized speech, and Luther Schlacht opened his ears to his concluding words.

"After we dismiss, you will report to the drill field and join your squad. We will complete the exercise by marching to the temple where we will be addressed by the commander."

He halted, clicked his heels, and called out sharply, "Achtung!"

Instantly, all snapped erect and, facing the poster, briskly saluted with the cry, "Heil!"

As arms snapped to sides, the Leader exclaimed, "Dismissed!"

Quickly, they moved to the rear of the room, down a flight of narrow concrete steps that led into a broad tunnel where they joined other men and women heading in the same direction. Flowing with the crowd, Luther Schlacht thought of the coming assembly in the temple. This was not a regular thing; like target practice with the stolen laser weapons, it happened infrequently. He wondered what it meant. He was tired, but weariness disappeared in the excitement of anticipation.

The tunnel led into a great chamber, signs of past splendor still evident in the remnants of mosaic tiling which clung here and there to the cracked concrete walls. This had been a central terminal of the underground rail system in the days before the war. The open space had been leveled, and this was the drill field.

He went to his assigned area, joined his squad. The squads formed into platoons, the platoons into a company; and to recorded music blaring from loudspeakers they marched.

An hour of brisk drilling ended with their marching four abreast along one of the tunnels, this one paved with slabs of slate. Rank upon high-stepping rank they swept through the shadowed corridor to another one-time terminal. The rhythm of military music followed them, coming from speakers suspended overhead.

Now he could see the arena with its gently sloping floor, at its center the altar. With sudden mechanical precision the right hands of the platoon ahead extended as one in stiff-armed salute, as all heads turned sharply to the right. Then it was his turn — and there stood a statue of the Leader. Luther Schlacht caught a glimpse of the familiar face with its shapeless mustache and lock of wayward hair, and a vague question began forming in his mind. He smothered it instantly.

This was the Great Leader.

The hands dropped swiftly as other hands rose behind them. And Luther Schlacht, with eyes fixed rigidly on the man before him, thought of what was to follow. There would be a ceremony, then the sacrifice of an animal; and finally every man of the regiment would bow in prayer to the Elder Gods, the Gods who lived since the world was young. Gods of power, warrior gods — Wodan, Allfather, and his sons, Ziu and Donar. Then, dismissed, they would move upward through scores of exits and melt into the half-life of a loosely controlled prison city.

The strains of brisk music throbbed in his ears. His feet rose and fell . . . rose . . .

And fell. And as suddenly as though he had been stricken deaf, there was no music!

Luther Schlacht faltered, looking wildly around. The music was gone, the tunnel gone, everything gone; he stood alone. He looked down at his feet, his *bare* feet. Mighty Allfather, he was as naked as one newborn.

He ran a hand through his short, bristling hair, his mind groping sluggishly.

He stood on a wide, wide road, a highway so broad hundreds might march abreast upon it. It was marble, polished as smooth as a rifle's bore. To right and left of the road stretched an emerald plain, and in the distance he saw great castles rising into a flawless sky, glittering against the blue with the brilliance of polished gold. He looked behind him, and he saw the beginning of the road. A gate barred its end, merging with a mighty wall like the ramparts of a giant's fortress, a gigantic gate, tall as a mountain, and gleaming with golden light like the distant castles. And beyond it stretched a bridge, a bridge of crystal, rainbow-bright and rainbow-shaped, arching across the world.

Luther Schlacht slowly turned away from the awesome spectacle, dread growing in his numbed mind. Surely he was dead, and this was Asgard, the home of the Gods! That great arch must be the bridge Bifrost over which the Valkyries bore the souls of the valiant dead. Had he been so borne? He

closed his eyes and strove mightily to remember, but he only knew that one moment he had been marching past a statue of the Leader, and the next he was here.

He stood in indecision in the middle of the road. Should he follow the highway or cross the green toward the nearest castle? Something like an undertow drew him along the road, deciding for him. He shrugged, relieved. This was like an order, and orders were to be followed. He started walking.

In moments his stride fell mechanically into a rhythmic march, and he moved briskly ahead looking neither to right nor to left. He thought of Frieda. With permission they were to have been joined; now that could never be. He felt sad, yet the memory seemed unreal. As though all was a dream.

Asgard — if this were Asgard, where were the Gods? Where was — anyone? Here was nothing but the complete stillness. He checked an impulse to glance over his shoulder.

At last he saw ahead a castle looming large on the crest of a hill, the road climbing to meet it, and now he thought only of the wonder of this creation of the Gods. It was vast beyond understanding, its great towers beyond counting, its walls dazzling, its portal smaller only than the gate at the end of Bifrost.

He passed through a grove of great trees with leaves of shimmering gold, and he cowered like a dwarf at the foot of a mountainous stairway. The castle walls seemed to be fashioned of interwoven golden spears; he sensed this only dimly as the open portal held his gaze. He looked up and up to see at the apex of the doorway a great boar's head upon which perched a sleeping eagle.

This must be Valhalla, Hall of the Chosen Slain!

But the eagle — it should not be asleep! It should be looking out over all the world, keeping watch for the Allfather, Wodan! Only half-realized in the wonder of this mystery did he see the great green limb of a colossal tree stretched protectingly above Valhalla.

Something, that irresistible power, drew Luther Schlacht up the great stairway. His heart thudded heavily. Valhalla — where his father should be, feasting with the heroes of the ages. Was this to be *his* reward? He, too, was a soldier.

At the open portal he halted and peered in. He saw a vast chamber with a ceiling of golden shields, saw benches decorated with polished armor, saw countless long tables heaped high with food. He saw brawny men, yellow-haired, black-haired, armor-clad — and all with heads resting on folded arms upon the tables.

Asleep!

Bewildered, Luther Schlacht tried to turn away, but that resistless force swept him on into Valhalla, urged him across the polished floor. His bare

feet faltered as he darted fearful glances about him, and he was glad his feet were bare so that he could move without sound. As far as he could see, the rows of tables continued, at each two-score men — and all slept.

Asleep! The word rang in his brain. Was all Asgard asleep? Were the prayers of his race unheard? Were the teachings of the Leader and his successors false?

What of his father? Was he here, asleep like all the rest? He looked half-fearfully at the men he passed, then looked more closely as fear gave way to wonder. These warriors were *old*. Not old as living men might be, but mummy-old, with skin yellowed and dried and tautly drawn over cheek and jaw and brow. Yet they were not dead! Here and there he could see shoulders barely rising and falling in shallowest breathing. Not dead, only deep in deepest sleep.

Perhaps in another part of Valhalla might sleep modern men of battle. He turned aside into a branching aisle, and as though permission were being granted, the strange guiding force lifted.

Everywhere through the gigantic hall Luther Schlacht wandered, seeking men of his own time. But, though he saw warriors in the garb of many lands, and though he saw men of different races, all were of an ancient day. And all were still with a stillness near that of death.

The teachings about the Elder Gods were lies! Here was no reward for the soldier dead of his day. Here no haven for heroic Aryans. The cords in the throat of Luther Schlacht swelled in anger, anger that died even as it formed. Fear stopped it, fear of this awesome place. Why was he here? He must leave!

As though in answer, the guiding power gripped him, and he sped toward the portal, sped out, down the long steps to the road of polished marble.

His pace slowed, became his habitual mechanical march. The action was instinctive, for he could think only of what he had seen in the Hall of Heroes.

After a time he saw a second great castle far ahead. That was the magnet drawing him, and there, perhaps, he would find answers. He marched on swiftly, and at last the immense structure with its intricate sculpturing, its golden towers, loomed above him. Its single great portal gaped in an edifice that, though smaller than Valhalla, outshone it in beauty and splendor. He strode through the open doorway.

He caught a glimpse of the golden interior, then saw only the twelve great seats at the end of the hall, in which sat twelve of the Elder Gods. Not asleep these, the mighty ones of Gladheim, the judgment hall of Asgard! Luther Schlacht fell to his knees and hid his face in his hands.

“Arise, warrior.” A mighty voice swept through the hall, echoing, swelling. “We have called you; have no fear. Come forward.”

Slowly, Luther Schlacht rose to stare at the awesome figure in the throne-seat high above the other Gods. Wodan, Allfather, God of the Wind, God of

Wisdom, Leader of Heroes. He saw a figure huge as a giant in a book of children's tales, gray-haired, bearded, with a golden eagle helmet upon his head, and a golden footstool under his feet. He wore a suit of gray, and a blue-gray mantle hung from his shoulders, on which rested two great ravens, blinking drowsily at Luther Schlacht. In one hand Wodan gripped a massive spear of gold, and at his booted feet lay two enormous wolves, their heads resting upon outstretched paws, apparently asleep.

As he drew closer, Luther Schlacht saw, half-concealed by a lock of iron-gray hair, the empty hollow which had held the missing eye of Wodan, the eye that the God had given in exchange for wisdom. He saw something more — the skin of Wodan, dry as parchment, like the skin of the warriors in Valhalla! And he saw weariness in the aged face, in the half-bowed head, the drooping body. Only the solitary eye seemed bright and youthful, and that eye transfixed Luther Schlacht as he halted a dozen feet from the God. The great voice swept past him.

"You have been called, warrior, as a messenger to your race. We have a tale for you to bear to those who command you. And we have a command for them that must be obeyed."

"Aye — *must* be obeyed!" a second voice rumbled; the sound was like thunder in distant hills.

Fearfully, Luther Schlacht looked at the second speaker, a God huge as Wodan, mighty thewed, with bristling red hair and beard. He knew this must be Donar even before he saw the huge, short-handled hammer clutched in one great fist. But even on the face of Donar, dark now as an overcast day, was that same veil of weary age.

Wodan said quietly, "Peace, Thor. They think they do well with us. Let them hear. Then, if they do not as we will . . ." He left the thought unfinished, and looked toward one of the other Gods. "Tell him the tale, Bragi."

And Bragi, God of Poetry and Music, swept his fingers across his golden harp and began to sing. It was a depressing song, a dolorous chant, and as it drifted through Gladsheim, Luther Schlacht felt a weight of sadness pressing upon him. Bragi sang:

*Once there was feasting, fighting and loving
In every castle throughout all Asgard.
Joyous those days when Wodan, Allfather,
Ruled in his mighty strength.*

*With his steed, Sleipnir, Wodan the Wind God
Rode over Bifrost, fought with the giants. . . .
Now he is weary.*

*Once mighty Donar, Thor, God of Thunder,
Ruled all the nations, ruled with his hammer,
Miolnir invincible.*

*Joyous to watch him shatter the rain clouds,
Waken the lightning, smite the great thunder-drums.
Joyous to watch him win every battle. . . .
Now Thor is weary.*

*Time was when every God found joy in living.
'Neath the ash, Yggdrasil, at Urdar fountain,
Drank we the waters, ate Idun's magic fruit,
Found youth unending.*

*Ziu, God of Battle, armed with his mighty sword —
Vali, the archer — Balder the beautiful —
His son, Forseti, wisest law-giver —
Fro, God of Sunshine — yea, even Bragi —
All dwelt in happiness here within Asgard. . . .
Now we are weary.*

Bragi paused, and silence filled Gladsheim. Luther Schlacht scarcely breathed lest he displease the Gods. Then again Bragi stroked his golden harp and began to sing.

*Over Asgard Wodan looked
Long and long ago.*

*He saw Valhalla's chosen slain
Battling on Asgard's plain,
Dealing wounds that gave no pain.
Rising, feasting, to fight again.*

*He saw the Gods from first to last
In mold of dreary habit cast,
Their lives lived in a deathless past.*

*He bade the Gods at Gladsheim meet;
Saw each in his appointed seat
And said in accents drear:*

*"Our day is done.
The Norns have all their fabric spun.
The AEsir's race is almost run —
I swear it by my spear.*

*"Now shall we sleep.
All Asgard is awearied by the play
Of feasting, fighting through an endless day.*

*In sleep profound, as deep
As dark Ginnunga-gap, the Great Abyss,
We rest until the Midgard snake shall hiss.*

*"And none will call
The AEsir. All the Gods, the warrior slain,
Will sleep in peace until for Vigrid's plain
They leave each golden hall.
The Giallar-horn will wake us with its breath,
And Ragnarok will bring its promised death."*

Again Bragi fell silent. His deep-set eyes seemed to be peering into vistas of memory awakened by his song. Luther Schlacht looked narrowly at Wodan. The great bearded head had sunk against his chest, and his great hands hung limply from his knees. He stole a glance at Donar, whom the Gods called Thor, and he looked away hastily. Those fierce red eyes were fixed on him unwaveringly.

At long last Bragi picked up the thread of song. His words came slowly at first, and softly, then gradually they came faster, louder:

*Then Wodan bowed his head and slept,
And over Asgard slumber crept;
Unbroken silence fell.
Time walked heavy with years unborn,
Waiting the blast of Giallar-horn
To break the God-cast spell.*

*But ere the day Wodan decreed,
Faint voices whispered, "Gods give heed;
We worship thee alone.
A northern warrior race we are
Who call upon thee from afar —
O Gods, hear thou thine own!"*

*Unceasingly those voices came,
Those voices calling us by name,
Till sleep had left our eyes.
Awake at last, we sought for those
Whose prayers had shaken our repose —
And called you to the skies!*

Bragi laid his harp upon his knees. Luther Schlacht's gaze moved from face to face of the Gods before him, fearfully, not knowing what to expect. Then Wodan spoke.

"That is the tale, warrior. Tell the leaders of your race that we want none of their worship. We seek only rest. Tell them to call upon other gods. If they do not let us rest —"

Thor thundered, "If they do not let us rest, I'll gird me with my belt Megin-Giord, and I'll take Miolnir the crusher, and I'll smite your land from the face of Midgard. Tell them that, and may they heed!" The cloak of years seemed to drop from Thor as he whirled his hammer about his head. Faint thunder rumbled through Gladsheim, and lightning sparks flashed from the whirling weapon.

"Go, warrior," Wodan said solemnly. "Go and tell what you have seen and heard. And even as Thor has said — woe to your race if they do not cease their praying."

Stiffly, Luther Schlacht strode from the golden hall. His mind was completely numbed. He could not think, could not have told his own name. His feet began to rise and fall in a rhythmic march. Rose and fell, rose . . .

And fell. And strains of martial music blared in his startled ears.

Before him he saw a square-shouldered figure, one of a long, straight line of marching men. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the stone figure of the Leader that they had just passed. Had — had all that happened — or had he dreamed it in — in the time of a single step? If — if only he could think . . . His jaws tightened. He knew what he had seen, and he knew what he must do.

Mechanically, he marched with his comrades. He pivoted with the precision born of long practice and turned into a hollow, at its center the altar where the sacrifice would be made. From the opposite side came another marching company. His heart pounded. The — Elder Gods did not want their worship, and he must tell it, must tell those in command. Dull wonder oppressed him. Why had *he* been chosen, he who had such a small mastery of words?

The cadence slowed; they marched in place. Suddenly, Luther Schlacht broke ranks, darting between the lines. Marchers faltered. Cries of protest arose, and as he ran toward the platform where the Leaders stood, someone shut off the music. During the moment of stunned silence Luther Schlacht sprang to the dais.

"Comrades," he shouted, "I have seen a vision. I am not good with words, but I have been commanded to tell what I have seen. The Gods, Wodan, Donar and the rest — they do not want our worship. They have been asleep for centuries, and they want only to continue sleeping. We have disturbed them —"

A red-faced officer reached him at that instant and clutched his shoulder, spinning him around. "Fool," he rasped. "Idiot! I'll disturb you! Sacrilege! Your name?"

Instinctively, Luther Schlacht's fist drew back and struck the officer's jaw. The hand fell away from his shoulder. He must tell what he had seen and none could stop him.

"Hear, comrades! I was marching toward the temple — then in an instant I was lifted up, and I was marching in Asgard on a great highway! And I saw

the Gods, comrades — I saw Wodan, Donar, Ziu, Bragi, and the others — with my own eyes I saw them. And they bade me tell that we must stop our worship. I saw Valhalla — and none of our race are there. Our Leaders' teachings are false — lies — ”

As though a closed switch had released the waters of a dam, a great, angry roar surged through the temple. And like the waters of a dam the mass of men swept toward him. Hands reached for him, hands that sought to rend and crush, hands that he kicked futilely while he shouted of Donar and his threats. Those hands bore him from the platform, and blows were showered upon him, blows he scarcely felt.

Words hammered in his brain, solemn words of Wodan: “Woe to your race if they do not cease their praying. . . .” The thought vanished in a cloud of blackness as something thudded against the head of Luther Schlacht.

Dully, Luther Schlacht looked through the barred entrance of the prison toward the nearby forest. There was a puzzled glint in his blue eyes, and a hint of anger in the twist of his full lips. He thought of many things as he stood there watching the play of sunlight through the leaves. He thought of the mockery of a trial a week ago when again he had told of his vision. He thought of the laughter. He thought of the Leader, and for the first time since he was able to think, he saw him only as a man of the past who had deluded them all with lies — lies!

There would be little time for him to think. He had been condemned — not to the executioner's axe, as he had expected — but to something worse. Because of the nature of his crime, because of his unparalleled sacrilege, he would be the first human sacrifice to the Elder Gods. Since his offense was against the Gods, it was to them he must atone. And since the Underground even now hovered on the brink of a break to freedom, was awaiting the psychological moment to strike, it was fitting that they make a great sacrifice.

All of today was to be spent by the faithful in prayer and fasting, and tonight, with the setting sun, he would be marched to the temple, would be bound to the altar — would die! He scowled. Would die in the stead of cattle. Why had this befallen him? He had meant no harm, had only obeyed orders.

With slowly mounting fear Luther Schlacht watched the shadows of dusk creep through the forest. Nervously, he paced the floor of the delapidated building, moving to the limit of the chain attached to his leg iron. Left alone in the room, he had tested the anchorage of the chain, but there was no possibility of his breaking loose. With growing fear he watched the dusk deepen. Doubts assailed him. Had he imagined his vision? “*Woe to your race —*” When would the Gods act?

Through the gloom he saw two men approaching, one his friend Hans Schmale. He straightened, stood at attention. He was a soldier. Hans gave no sign of recognition as he unlocked the manacle. Soberly, they led him out, their feet rising and falling with the regularity of the drill field. They

passed through the strip of woods, and Luther Schlacht saw a platoon of soldiers waiting near the hidden entrance to the tunnels, a gap for three men in their ranks.

He glanced toward the setting sun, his last glimpse of it, he thought. Then he gasped and halted, pointing. He heard an amazed growl, then:

"Mighty Allfather — planes! We've been betrayed!"

A stunned instant, then: "There are hundreds. . . . Quick, the temple!" And Luther Schlacht stood alone, forgotten.

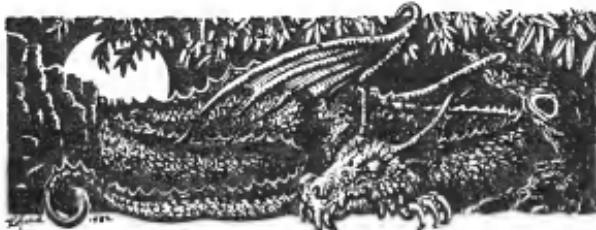
Puzzled, he looked into the murky red of the western sky, past the jagged teeth of wrecked buildings. What had they meant — planes? There were no planes. Only a great black cloud hiding the sun, and the chariot of Donar riding upon the cloud. The God had come as he had said, and they spoke of planes.

A giant, Donar, standing upright in his great brazen chariot, his red hair and beard bristling, angry fire leaping from his eyes, his mighty hammer held aloft. Two great goats drew him across the heavens, sparks flying from their swift hoofs. It was strange; though the great black cloud, spreading over more and more of the sky, was clearly visible, Donar and his chariot seemed like a vision, dimly seen through the dusk. Yet he could hear plainly the rumble and drone of the chariot wheels. And now the Thunder-God began to hurl Miolnir the Smiter.

Luther Schlacht heard a muffled roar, saw a spurt of angry fire. Another roar — and another — then an endless din. There arose flames, and sluggish yellow-gray smoke. And that cloud continued spreading. Now it was above him, and he could no longer see the God. But the roar of the chariot wheels had become deafening, and he could see gaping openings where the mighty blasts penetrated into the heart of the Underground, imagined he could hear faint screams in the tumult.

Detachedly, Luther Schlacht wondered at his own calm. Yet why should this excite him? He had been warned. He sat on a crumbled wall to watch the destruction.

He was still sitting there when a world-engulfing detonation burst nearby. And even as he died, Luther Schlacht wondered vaguely if he — who had obeyed the Elder Gods — might not awaken in Valhalla. •



CLEAN SLATE
by Timothy Zahn
art: Daniel R. Horne





There were a hundred small towns and villages along the road to Abron Mysti, and at each one they warned Saladar that his trip was going to be wasted, that Gyran Pass had been forcibly closed. Those whose advice he ignored clearly labeled him a fool; those to whom he tried explaining just as clearly labeled him an arrogant fool. Eventually, he gave up explaining, and merely set his face toward the gray-green peaks of the Bartop Mountains and kept walking.

The last few leagues were the hardest. The towns and their well-meaning residents petered out as the road began to slope upward toward the mountains, and he quickly discovered why most travelers chose to make this trip on beastback. But he hardly noticed the effort. He was almost there, and it was looking more and more like he was going to be the first to arrive . . . and for the opportunity that lay ahead he would gladly have given years of his life.

As he had, of course, already done.

Whether by deliberate design or simple accident of landscape, the final approach to Abron Mysti was an impressive one. With the foothills of the Bartop Mountains rising up around him, Saladar topped a slight swell in the road itself; and suddenly the town was there, spread at his feet between the straight-walled gap leading into the mountains behind it and a narrow white-water river before it. The houses and trade buildings making up the town were clean and attractive; the lack of activity around them, highly abnormal.

Which meant he'd indeed made it in time. Travel through Gyran Pass was still halted. Taking a deep breath, he straightened his cloak and started down toward the town.

The road ended at a drawbridge spanning the river, a posted sign nearby proclaiming the toll to be four *dan*. Two small cottages flanked the road on the far side of the bridge, but there was no sign of any bridge keeper. "Hello?" he called. "Is anyone there?"

For a minute the roaring of the river beneath the bridge was the only sound. Then the door of the cottage on the right opened, and a young woman peered out. "What is it?" she called.

Saladar gestured to the sign. "Are you the bridge keeper?" he shouted.

An odd look flicked across her face, but it passed and she gestured him forward. He crossed and stepped up to her. "Are you the bridge keeper?" he repeated.

She shook her head, lips compressing briefly. "The bridge keeper's in town. Probably getting drunk."

Saladar's gaze slipped to her neck, to the widow's white scarf knotted there. "Do you accept fees in his absence?" he asked.

Her eyes showed she was tempted . . . but those eyes held pride, too. "No," she said. "Forget the toll — if he's not here to collect, the city just loses out. A few *dan* aren't going to make any difference, anyway."

"No," he agreed. "Thank you. Do you serve the bridge in any capacity, then?"

"My husband was bridge keeper once," the woman said shortly. "He's dead now. I had nowhere else to go, so they allowed me to stay here. Is there anything else?"

Saladar inclined his head slightly. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to pry. If I may ask one more favor, though, would you be kind enough to direct me to your ruler?"

She frowned. "Why?"

In answer, he reached down into his tunic and withdrew the blood-red heartstone on its chain. "My name is Saladar," he told her. "I've come to help you."

For a long moment the woman stared at the gently throbbing heartstone, a look of disgust and hatred distorting her features. Then without a word, she disappeared back inside, slamming the door behind her.

For a moment Saladar just stood there, staring at the spot where she'd been, his head spinning with the sheer unexpectedness of it. Throughout his lifetime he'd been greeted with everything from lavish adoration to utter indifference . . . but never by such complete revulsion.

But it didn't really matter. The wizard's oath he'd taken all those years ago had spoken of service to those in need. It had made no mention of serving only those who fed his pride.

And with the chance to fulfill that oath finally within his grasp, it would take a lot more than simple hatred to stop him. A *lot* more.

Abruptly, he realized he was still holding the heartstone out on its chain. Taking a calming breath, he slipped it back into his tunic, feeling the warmth as it settled again into the accustomed spot next to his heart. Stepping back from the cottage, he headed down toward the center of Abron Mysti.

Cyng Borthnin was a big, almost brutish-looking man — a living example, Saladar thought, of the small-village belief that equated physical stature and power with the ability to rule.

"A wizard, huh?" Borthnin grunted as Saladar slid the heartstone back into his tunic. "Took your time getting here, didn't you? It's been almost two months."

"I came as soon as word reached me, my lord Cyng," Saladar said evenly. "The world is a very large place, hardly something easily filled by a handful of wizards."

Borthnin made a face. "Oh, certainly," he said, a touch of bitterness in his voice. "Yes, we of Abron Mysti know very well just how few of you there are." He eyed Saladar with undisguised suspicion. "So. You're here to open Gyran Pass again, are you? How much do you plan to charge for this favor?"

Saladar frowned. "Nothing, my lord Cyng," he told the other. "Merely my room and board while I study the problem —"

One of the small group of men seated to either side of Borthnin muttered something under his breath. Saladar shifted his gaze to the man, and the other fell reluctantly silent. "My room and board while I study the problem," he repeated. "And that for no more than a week. Probably less."

Borthnin nodded. "So. A week's room and board. And when you've found how to vanquish the beast?"

"I charge no fee, if that's what you mean," Saladar said, anger beginning to stir within him. "If you'll forgive me, my lord Cyng, you don't talk like the ruler of a town whose sole means of livelihood has been snatched away from it. I'd think you'd be willing to pay practically any price to have Gyran Pass open again."

A growling rumble from Borthnin's counselors broke off at a wave of the Cyng's hand. "You think that, do you?" Borthnin said darkly. "Well, perhaps you also think we're more gullible than in truth we are."

"And you think I'm going to try to cheat you —?"

"Listen, wizard, we know just how close and exclusive your group is," Borthnin cut him off angrily. "One of our own tried to join, and they killed him for his effort." He stopped, visibly gathering his control about him again. "No, wizard. If it's some beast or natural creature in the Lighttower, it'll eventually leave of its own accord. And if it's some wizard's trick being played against Abron Mysti, we aren't going to come fawning to another of that same group to rescue us."

"Then your city may die," Saladar warned him.

"So be it," Borthnin shot back. "At least we'll die as men."

For a handful of heartbeats Saladar gazed into Borthnin's face. Then, without a word, he turned and left the council house.

Outside, he paused, letting his anger at such stupidity cool while he considered what to do next. It had taken longer to locate the Cyng than he'd expected, and the sun was dipping toward the horizon. Too late now to go up into Gyran Pass and get back before dark — and whatever it was that travelers were unable or unwilling to face by day he had no desire to encounter by night.

Which likewise left out the possibility of camping at the entrance to the pass. He could find a room in Abron Mysti, of course, staying at his own expense . . . but he had a measure of pride, too, and after that confrontation he would shrivel up and die before he would give Borthnin the satisfaction. Turning his back to the mountains, he retraced his steps back toward the river.

The bridge was still in place — the bridge keeper, no doubt, still drowning his sorrows in town. He was about to cross when a voice from his left stopped him. "You leaving?"

He turned. The woman he'd spoken to earlier had emerged from her cot-

tage, a hoe in her hand. "Only for the night," he told her. "I'll be back in the morning to take a look at the pass."

Her lips compressed. "Is our hospitality that lacking that you prefer sleeping outside?"

"I wouldn't know. Cyng Borthnin decided the town isn't willing to provide me a bed for the night."

The sour look on her face flickered out, to be replaced by surprise. "He --? What did you say to him?"

"Only the truth. That I came to try to help Abron Mysti get rid of whatever was blocking Gyran Pass." He eyed the woman, a sudden suspicion dawning on him. "He mentioned that a local resident had tried to become a wizard. Your husband?"

Her face hardened, and for a moment he thought she would slam the door on him again . . . and then her whole body seemed to slump. "Yes," she said softly, her voice barely audible over the roar of the river.

Saladar felt an echo of pain in his own heart. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Slowly, her eyes came back up to his face. "Why did you come here?"

"I already told you. To try to help."

"And you're staying? Even after . . . everything?"

He nodded. "I have to."

"Why?"

He hesitated. *Because this may be the only chance I ever have to be a wizard*, the thought whispered through his mind. "Because it's my job," he said aloud. "Because it's what I'm called to do."

For a long moment she just stared at him. "My name is Marja," she said at last. "I . . ." She took a deep breath. "I have a spare room."

Her husband's name, Saladar learned two hours later, had been Nunisjan.

"He left three years ago this autumn," Marja told him, the soft candlelight bathing her face with gentle radiance as she collected the dishes from their evening meal. "Travel through the mountains slackens with the first snowfall of winter, you know, and for those months a bridge keeper has little to do. He'd always felt that Abron Mysti was important enough to have its own resident wizard, and so he . . . left . . . to try to become one."

"And never returned?" Saladar asked quietly.

She turned her back to him, busying herself with the dishes. "A dove arrived here a year later," she said over her shoulder, her voice wavering slightly. "It carried a message for me from his mentor. Word of his death."

Saladar sighed soundlessly. "I'm sorry."

She didn't reply, and for a few minutes the room was silent except for the clinking of dishware. "How did it happen?" he asked at last.

"The message didn't say." She paused. "I was hoping . . . you might be able to tell me."

Saladar shook his head. "I'm sorry. There are any number of dangerous

spells a wizard has to learn. A mistake with any one of them —”

“Brings on the Wizard’s Curse?”

He winced. “You’ve heard of the Wizard’s Curse?”

“Hasn’t everybody?” she retorted. “Though most people around here think it’s nothing but a rumor started by the wizards to keep other people from seeking the Power for themselves.”

“Yes, I got that impression from Cyng Borthnin earlier,” Saladar said heavily. “I’ve heard that said before, too, in other places. But it isn’t true. The number of wizards is limited solely by the number of heartstones available.”

“You really need those things? I always thought they were just for impressing the peasants.”

“No, they’re absolutely vital. Without a heartstone to strengthen and guide the Power, none of the truly potent spells will work.”

She seemed to consider that. “Then what’s the Wizard’s Curse?”

Saladar grimaced. “Perhaps by tomorrow I’ll be able to tell you.”

Marja turned from her work to frown at him. “What do you mean?”

He hesitated, his first instinct to deflect the question. But it had lain hidden in his heart for so long . . . and anyway, with this trouble facing her town perhaps she had a right to know. “No one’s ever told me what the Wizard’s Curse was,” he said in a low voice. “It’s the price a wizard must pay for the privilege of using the Power — that’s all my mentor would ever tell me. He wouldn’t say anything more.”

“Yes, but you’ve been a wizard yourself for — surely for many years.”

“Fifteen.” He turned away from her eyes, to the small window and the still-lighted tips of the mountains beyond. “I’ve been a wizard for fifteen years. Or at least that’s how long I’ve had my heartstone. But in all that time I’ve never had the chance to use the Power.”

He could feel her eyes on him. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s there not to understand?” he lashed out, fifteen years’ worth of accumulated frustration welling from him like brackish water. “I’m never at the right place at the right time, that’s all. I hear of some catastrophe — something where the wizard’s Power is needed — and I go to try to help. But by the time I can get there and get ready, it’s . . . it’s too late. Someone else always manages to get there ahead of me and deal with the problem.”

For a long moment she didn’t speak. “Well,” she said at last, her voice uncertain. “At least that means you . . . well, you’ve got a clean slate to work from, anyway. I mean, even if you haven’t . . . done much, you haven’t fouled anything up, either. Like some wizards I’ve heard stories of . . .”

She trailed off, and Saladar blinked against tears of shame and anger. *A clean slate.* The sheer lameness of the phrase fairly dripped with scorn and pity. “Would *you* be content with such a life?” he snarled.

“I *have* such a life,” she whispered.

Saladar sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said, ashamed of himself. His long bitter-

ness was no excuse to stir up similar feelings in others. "I just . . ." He dabbed surreptitiously at his eyes, his heartstone throbbing sympathetically with his emotion. "This may be my only chance to be a wizard, Marja," he said, the words coming out with difficulty. "I'm here — the *first* one here, for a change. If I can rid Abron Mysti and Gyran Pass of this trouble — whatever it is" — he took a deep breath — "then maybe I'll be able to justify having wasted my possession of a heartstone for all these years."

"And what of the Wizard's Curse?" she asked quietly.

"I don't care," he said, and meant it. "Whatever the price, I'll pay it."

For a long minute the room was silent. "Nunisjan used to talk like that," Marja sighed at last. "Will you need a guide tomorrow to . . . where the trouble is?"

Saladar shook his head. "Thank you, but you'd better stay here. It's likely to be dangerous."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "So? What do I have to live for?"

"Marja —"

"I want to come, Saladar. I . . . want to see what this dream is that Nunisjan gave his life for."

Saladar bowed his head. "All right."

They left at sunrise the next morning, though the colors of the dawn were hidden by the mountains before them. Still, by the time they'd crossed to the other end of Abron Mysti and started up the slopes of the mountains, the sky above them was bright enough to see by.

And bright enough to show Wizardell in all its splendor.

"It was some wizard, several hundred years ago, who did this," Marja told him as they stepped into the straight-walled passage. "Gyran Pass doesn't quite extend all the way through to this side of the Bartop Mountains, and I suppose the wizard got tired of having to climb up along the side of Mount Mysti every time he came through from Colinthe. So he just sliced a huge gap in the mountain and finished the pass properly."

Saladar nodded, raising his eyes briefly from the high walls of the gap to the still higher peaks of Mount Mysti towering above it. He'd heard the story of Wizardell, of course, but no story could match the sheer impact of seeing the place for himself. "Incredible," he murmured.

"Yes," Marja agreed, running her fingertips along the nearest wall as they walked. "I remember trying to gouge out a hole in one of the walls once when I was younger. I couldn't even make a good scratch in it."

"Yes, he would have had to permanently strengthen the rock, or the wind and snow would eventually have broken it down." *The things the right man can do with a heartstone*, Saladar thought, a touch of bitterness tainting the wonder in his heart. *Why can't I ever come up with ideas like this?* Resolutely, he shook the thought from his mind. "Where is this Lighttower that Cyng Borthnin mentioned?"

"At Wizardell's end, where the natural pass begins," Marja explained, pointing ahead. "There was a natural column of stone at that spot, and the wizard decided to leave it standing. But he rounded it and carved out a room in the top with a door and windows where men could run a light to help guide travelers at night."

"Does Abron Mysti do that?"

She shook her head. "There aren't enough nighttime travelers to make it worthwhile."

"So when whatever it was got into the Lighttower, no one was there to see it."

"Or to be killed by it," she countered stiffly.

He grimaced. "There's that, of course. How close are we?"

"About a tenth league from the Lighttower itself, but we'll be able to see it as soon as we round this bend."

Saladar nodded, drawing his heartstone out of his tunic and clutching it tightly in his hand. The straight walls bent slowly around . . . straightened out again . . . there was the Lighttower, fully as impressive as Wizardell itself —

And without warning a horrible wailing shriek exploded into the gap, filling Saladar's ears as it reverberated again and again from the stone walls.

Beside him Marja screamed, the sound utterly pale in contrast, as she flung herself cringing against the wall. Head ringing with terror, Saladar was only dimly aware of grabbing her arm and dragging her back, squeezing his heartstone with manic strength —

The wailing cut off as suddenly as it had appeared, though for several seconds Saladar's ears seemed to echo with the memory of it. Beside him Marja clutched unashamedly at him, her whole body shaking. Saladar held her to him, working moisture back into his mouth, letting the heartstone's soothing power flow into them both.

Even so, it was several minutes before either of them could speak. "I see your problem," Saladar said at last.

Breathing deeply, Marja pulled back from him. But not too far. "Gods above and demons below," she whispered hoarsely. "I had no idea. No idea."

"Agreed." Saladar licked his lips. "I take it beasts simply refuse to pass the Lighttower?"

"Beasts and people both." She shuddered, violently.

Saladar glanced toward the Lighttower, now hidden again by the walls of Wizardell. "I can't say I blame them," he admitted. "Still . . . has anyone actually been attacked?"

"I doubt anyone's gotten that close," she retorted, a measure of spirit beginning to return.

He nodded. "Understandable. I suppose someone ought to find out for sure, though. You'd better wait here —"

"Wait a minute," she snapped, stepping into his path. "Gods and demons, Saladar — are you insane?"

He sighed. "Look, Marja, no hunting beast would warn its prey like that, at least not before it was close enough to attack. If there's something trapped or stuck in the Lighttower, it can't hurt me down here." He gestured toward the sheer walls rising above them. "By the same token, I can't do anything about it from down here . . . and it's pretty obvious I can't get up to the Lighttower from Wizardell."

For a long moment she gazed up at his face. Then she exhaled in a long, tired sigh. "All right," she said. "The way up to the Lighttower is only a short distance into Gyran Pass. I'll show you where."

Saladar had sensed her offer coming, but he was still impressed. "Thank you, Marja. But I could be wrong about what's in the Lighttower —"

"You'll never find the path by yourself," she cut him off angrily. "And I'd rather be with you than all alone here, anyway. Come on, let's get it over with."

"All right," he hesitated. "But perhaps I can make it easier for you. If you don't mind being deaf for the next half-hour or so."

"You can do that?" she asked, looking wary.

"I know the spell. I've never tested it, but it's supposed to be perfectly safe."

She grimaced. "I . . . all right."

Stepping close to her, Saladar placed the point of the heartstone against her forehead. Giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, he began to speak the spell.

The shrieking began again as they came around within view of the Lighttower, and for the first few steps Saladar didn't think he was going to make it. Unwilling to risk deafness for both of them — there might be other dangers in Gyran Pass besides the creature in the Lighttower — he had had to settle for protecting himself with a strong calming spell. But it didn't help nearly as much as he'd hoped it would. Gripping his heartstone, mentally ordering it to slow his heartbeat to a less frantic pace, he clutched Marja's hand and forced himself to keep going.

It was almost a shock when he abruptly noticed they were passing the smoothly rounded base of the Lighttower. *Half-done*, he told himself as they kept going. *The hard part's half-done. From here on it'll be easier.*

It wasn't really any easier, but it *did* turn out to be shorter. With the smooth walls of Wizardell giving way to the more natural contours of Gyran Pass, visibility around them changed dramatically, and without warning the wailing abruptly cut off as the Lighttower dropped out of sight behind a craggy hill.

Saladar stopped, his trembling knees refusing for a moment to continue. Marja gazed at him in silence, a mixture of concern and awe on her face.

Giving her hand a reassuring squeeze, he got his feet moving again, and together they headed up into Gyran Pass.

They reached the path Marja had mentioned within a hundred paces, and Saladar had to admit that he probably *wouldn't* have found it on his own. From a totally ordinary cut between two boulders it stretched along an intermittent stream bed, twisting between scraggly trees and jutting layers of rock as it worked its way upward.

"We should be able to see the Lighttower from that rise ahead."

Concentrating on his climbing, Saladar jumped at the sound of Marja's voice. "You startled me," he muttered in vague embarrassment. "Your hearing's back, then? I was starting to wonder if the spell had affected your voice, too."

She shook her head. "No. But it sounded strange when I tried talking without being able to hear —" She shivered.

"I'll have to remember that for next time." Saladar took a deep breath. "Well, I thank you for you help, Marja, but from this point on I'd better go alone."

"Why? Can't you protect me from whatever kind of beast is —?"

"It's not a beast. It's some sort of spiritual being."

She seemed to shrink slightly into her skin. "What?" she whispered. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "It kept up that scream the whole time we were in sight of the Lighttower, without ever having to rest or even pause for breath. No physical creature can do that."

Marja licked her lips, her eyes staring past Saladar's shoulder. "But what would a spirit be doing in the Lighttower?"

"That's one of the things I'm going to have to find out," Saladar said grimly. "Maybe someone in Abron Mysti made an enemy of one of them — offended it somehow — and this is its way of taking revenge. Or maybe it was someone at the other end of Gyran Pass in Colinthe," he added as she started to object. "It may not have been your fault — shutting off the pass hurts both towns equally."

Marja shifted her gaze to his face. "Can you stop it? Destroy it, or send it back where it came from?"

He considered lying, but she deserved the whole truth. "I don't think I can destroy it. Spells of that power . . . well, if you don't do them exactly right, they can easily turn back against you."

Marja's lips pressed together into a bloodless line. "Perhaps that's what the Wizard's Curse is."

"Maybe part of it," Saladar said shortly. Reminders of dark curses weren't exactly what he needed just now. "As for sending the spirit back" — he shrugged — "that'll depend on what kind of being it is and why it's trying to close the pass. And maybe on whether I can reason or bargain with it."

Clenching her teeth, Marja straightened her shoulders. "Well, there's no

point in standing here, then, is there? Let's go."

"Marja —"

"Saladar, I have to go with you." She looked up at him, her eyes pleading. "Nunisjan's dream, remember?"

He took a deep breath, exhaled it tiredly. He had no business taking her into danger like this, but he had to admit she'd earned the right to see what was trying to kill her town.

Besides which, deep down he knew he would welcome the company. The first time, he was quickly finding out, was harder on a man's courage than he'd expected it to be. "All right," he sighed at last. "Come on."

They topped the rise, and as Marja had guessed, the rounded top of the Lighttower was indeed visible through the grass and scrub. Saladar placed his heartstone between their two hands, hoping it would be able to keep both of them calm if the spirit started screaming again. Cautiously, they moved forward.

There were no windows on this side, but facing them from the rear of the Lighttower was the shaded opening of a doorway. The obvious direction for an attack to come from — though with spiritual beings that might not mean much — and Saladar kept his eyes on the black rectangle as they walked.

But the spirit didn't seem to be paying any attention to the approach behind it. No unearthly face appeared in the shadows; no ethereal form swooped down from the blue sky toward them . . . and as they continued on without even one of the well-remembered shrieks splitting the air, Saladar began to find the situation increasingly odd. And increasingly ominous.

Marja did too. "Do you think it's hiding?" she whispered nervously in Saladar's ear. "Waiting to ambush us?"

"I don't think so," he murmured back. "I'm beginning to think it's incapable of attacking anyone."

"That's good, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

They reached the doorway, and there Saladar paused and took a deep breath. "Okay," he said, prying his fingers away from Marja's. "Wait here a second."

"Saladar —"

"Just for a minute," he assured her. "I've got an idea of what's going on, but I have to be sure."

Setting his teeth, he stepped under the low lintel into the Lighttower . . . to find the spirit waiting for him.

Not that it had much choice in the matter. Spread-eagled against a glinting star shape larger than a man, its red eyes turned toward Saladar from the window where its imprisoning pentagram had been propped up; it glared at him in an eloquent silence of rage.

For a moment Saladar gazed back. Then, with a grimace, he half-turned

back toward the doorway. "It's all right, Marja," he called.

She came in quickly, a strangled gasp escaping her lips as she moved up behind him. "Gods above and demons below," she breathed. "What is that?"

"The source of your trouble. As you see, I was right about Abron Mysti or Colinthe offending someone. I was just a little off as to who the offended party was."

Marja stared at the spirit for a moment. "Whoever it was who was angry with us trapped that — whatever it is — on that pentagram?"

Saladar nodded. "I think it's called a Fury. Not a very intelligent type of spirit, from what I've heard, but relatively easy to trap. And perfectly adequate for terrifying people and beasts with."

Marja inhaled raggedly. "Why isn't it screaming at us now?"

Saladar shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps whoever brought it in here set up a geas as part of the spell so that it would only scream at people coming through the pass. Or maybe the fact that we got past it means it won't try to terrify us anymore. Either way, be grateful for small favors."

Marja looked over her shoulder, frowning. "How *did* they get it in here? The doorway — look, it's not nearly big enough."

"I know. They must have assembled the pentagram in here and then said the trapping spell." He studied the pentagram. "That coating looks like tight windings of silver threads, probably wrapped around fresh oak branches."

"Silver?"

"Heartstone magic can't touch silver directly," he explained. "Whoever set this up certainly didn't believe in making things easy."

She looked at the Fury. "Is there anything you can do?"

"Oh, certainly." Saladar hesitated. "Basically, all I need to do to release the Fury is to break the pentagram."

"So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that a released spirit doesn't go back immediately," he said heavily. "It'll stay here for several seconds . . . and it'll use those seconds trying its best to kill us."

"It'll *what*? But we're trying to *help* it."

"Doesn't matter. As I said, Furies aren't very intelligent. They're driven by rage and hatred, and they don't much care who or what they attack."

Marja looked back at the doorway again. "Could we move it safely? I mean, just away from the windows, where it can't see the pass?"

"Won't do any good," Saladar shook his head. "Spirits don't see things the same way we do. If it was ordered to scream at passersby, it'll do that whether it's by the windows or not."

Marja hissed between her teeth. "So we can't leave the Fury here, and we can't release it. What *can* we do?"

"Move it outside, of course, where we've got more room. And for that" —

he took a deep breath — “we’re going to have to widen the doorway.”

She stared at him. “How? The Lighttower is part of Wizardell, and I already told you how strong the walls are.”

He nodded. “I remember. It just means I’ll have to try to break that part of the spell.”

“Wait a minute. You said that without the spell-strengthening the walls would collapse.”

“Yes.” Saladar pursed his lips. “But it should be possible to break the spell just around the doorway without harming the rest of Wizardell.”

“Can you do it?”

“I think so, yes.”

“You *think* so?” Her tongue darted across her lips. “That’s not very reassuring. Maybe you ought to wait until you know for sure.”

Saladar shook his head. “There’s no point in waiting, Marja. I know as much as any other wizard —”

“Except you’ve never used that knowledge —”

“And anyway, now that we’re here we might as well try,” he cut her off sharply.

She stared at him, eyes hot with anger. “And besides which, if we take too much time thinking about it, some other wizard may come by and steal your thunder?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” she retorted. “Then why are you so eager to risk my town? Because you *are* risking it, you know. If Wizardell collapses, the trade routes will start up somewhere else and Abron Mysti will die.”

“Abron Mysti is already dead!”

For a long moment they just glared at each other. Saladar squeezed his heartstone, willing it to calm him. Eventually, it did. “Marja, look,” he sighed. “It’s been two months since the Fury was trapped here. The trade routes are already changing — you know that. If you don’t get them back this year, before winter closes the mountains, they’ll never return. There isn’t any choice; we *have* to take the risk.”

“‘We?’” she asked, voice dripping with irony.

“Yes, we,” he told her. “Because I’ll be in here when I speak the spell. If Wizardell collapses, I’ll go with it.”

He made her wait outside, as far away as she was willing to go, while he spoke the necessary spells.

It was straightforward enough, but that didn’t make it any less nerve-racking. First he traced a large circle of shimmering red fire around the doorway with the tip of his heartstone. A long and convoluted spell, and the thin red line changed to blue and then to green and then to white. A second, equally long spell, and the section of rock within the circle began to look faintly hazy.

Saladar licked his lips, watching tensely for just the right moment. The haze began to coalesce, forming itself into a thousand thin lines across the stone. Almost . . . The lines drew in more and more of the haze, grew brighter and clearer —

Now! He shouted the last part of the spell, squeezing the heartstone between palm and thumb and pointing it at the circle. The heartstone flared in response —

And with a tremendous roar, the rock within the circle shattered.

Saladar staggered back, head throbbing with the echo of that thunderclap. Dimly, he was aware of the sound of running footsteps —

“Saladar!” Marja called, appearing in the freshly enlarged doorway and stepping hurriedly across the rubble with little heed for the treacherous footing.

“I’m all right,” Saladar assured her. “Just . . . a little dizzy.”

She caught his arms, an anxious expression on her face. “The Wizard’s Curse?” she whispered.

“Will you forget the Wizard’s Curse?” he growled. “Come on — I’ll need your help to get that pentagram out of here.”

She looked over at the Fury. “Will it. . . ?”

“It can’t do anything to us while it’s trapped there,” he assured her. A strange tiredness seemed to be creeping over him. *The Wizard’s Curse?* Angrily, he shook away the thought.

He looked over to find Marja’s eyes on him. “But you said it would try to kill us when the pentagram was broken?” she asked carefully.

He nodded. “Yes, but don’t worry. If I do this properly, neither of us will be anywhere near the Fury when it gets loose.” Looking at the spirit, he braced himself. “Come on.”

It was a long climb to the top of Mount Mysti, a climb made longer still by the need to drag his heartstone along the ground the entire distance. But at last they made it. Turning around, bracing himself against the icy wind, Saladar looked down.

They were indeed high up. Below, the top of the Lighttower was a foreshortened knob at the edge of Wizardell’s straight-walled gap. To the Lighttower’s right, at the very base of the mountain, was a toy star with a pebble beneath each corner, the pebbles being the boulders he and Marja had moved under each of the pentagram’s five points. Even from this distance the setup looked strange, reminding Saladar of an oddly shaped table . . . or an oddly shaped altar.

“Is this going to be far enough away?” Marja asked into his thoughts, her teeth chattering in the cold.

“I hope so,” Saladar said, breathing deeply of air that seemed somehow too thin. “There doesn’t seem to be anywhere higher to go.”

“Gods above and demons below,” she muttered. “I wish this was over.”

"It will be soon." Turning away from the edge of the mountain, Saladar studied the ground around them. A large jagged outcropping caught his eye, and he stepped over to it. Tapping it with his heartstone, he spoke a spell.

Imperceptibly at first, then with ever increasing amplitude, the boulder began to rock in place. Back and forth, back and forth, until, all at once, it broke free, thudding to the ground at Saladar's feet. Walking around to its far side, Saladar held his heartstone to it and pushed, rolling it over to the edge where Marja waited. "Right there," she told him, unfolding one of her arms and pointing to the ground.

"I see it," Saladar nodded, his eyes picking out the end of the thin red line his heartstone had left glowing on the ground. Shifting direction slightly, he maneuvered the boulder onto the line.

And all was ready. "Here we go," he muttered to Marja. Gripping the heartstone, he put his hand against the boulder and threw a last look below. Taking a deep breath, he called out one final spell and pushed the stone over the edge.

It rolled slowly at first . . . then faster, and faster, picking up speed as it tumbled down the mountainside. Once, it hit a hidden bump and bounced high in the air, eliciting a gasp from Marja. But it didn't matter; the boulder's path, traced so laborously by the heartstone, wouldn't let it escape that easily. The stone hit the ground again, caught back onto the red line and continued down. Saladar squeezed the heartstone and held his breath —

And with a final bounce, the boulder smashed directly into the center of the pentagram.

The silver coating could protect the star from the power of a heartstone; against a falling rock, it was of no value whatsoever. Even from so far above, Saladar could imagine he heard the wrenching smash of wood and metal —

And with a shriek that seemed to freeze his blood in his veins the Fury rose from the wreckage.

Beside him, Marja screamed; but it was already all over. Even as the pale form arrowed upward toward them, red eyes flaming with mindless hatred, it was beginning to fade, its shriek taking on a strange, faraway quality. By the time it reached the mountaintop, it was nothing but pale red eyes and a blast of bitterly cold wind.

For a long moment they just stood there, listening to the shriek fade into the breeze. Then, slowly, as if in a dream, Marja turned to look at him. "You did it," she breathed. "You really did it."

"We did it," he corrected her. "I couldn't have done it without your help."

Carefully, almost shyly, Marja took his hand in hers. "Saladar —" She laughed suddenly, a short barking sound; and as he gazed at her, he saw two tears trickle down her cheeks. "Do you know that, for the first time since Nunisjan left . . . I think I understand why?"

Saladar put his arm around her shoulders, sympathetic tears blurring his own vision. Her eyes — there was a flicker of life again in those eyes, a flick-

er he'd not seen there before now. After three long years, he could sense that the healing of her soul had finally begun . . . and for that alone he would gladly have risked —

“What is it?” Marja asked, sensing the sudden tightness in his body.

“Nothing,” he said, as casually as possible. “But we probably ought to get back.”

Her face was suddenly stricken. “Gods and demons!” she whispered. “You mean . . . before . . . ?”

He nodded, a tight knot settling into his stomach. Now came the waiting . . . the waiting for the unknown. “I’d like to be back in Abron Mysti before the Wizard’s Curse takes effect.”

The night was full of strange dreams, but it was the faint noises outside that woke him the next morning. He was in bed, in Marja’s cottage, and for a moment he just lay there, feeling oddly disoriented. Outside, the faint noises continued; easing out of bed, he went to the window to look.

Down in the center of town, the citizens of Abron Mysti had taken to the streets in obvious celebration. Beyond them, between the foothills leading into the mountains, he could see a line of travelers and their beasts heading into Wizardell.

Into Wizardell . . . and into Gyran Pass beyond.

For a long minute, he stood there, the bitterly familiar taste of defeat on his tongue. Then, closing his eyes against the sight, he turned back and began to dress.

Marja was still asleep by the time he was ready to go. For a moment he paused at the door to her room, gazing down at her face as shame warred against the requirements of courtesy. The shame won. Quietly, he turned away, crossing to the outer door and slipping outside. He had enough contempt for himself; he didn’t need to feel hers as well.

The bridge was still in place and still untended, though the bridge keeper would undoubtedly be returning to his post very soon now. Crossing the river, Saladar headed away from the mountains. There was no need to look back, but as he topped the first rise in the road, he couldn’t help doing so anyway.

Beyond the celebration, the line of travelers into Wizardell could still be seen, and Saladar felt his lip twist with impotent fury. So Gyran Pass had been reopened, and Abron Mysti saved . . . and once again, history had repeated itself. While he’d hesitated — while he’d wasted time with a woman not his own — someone else had beaten him to the goal.

Once again, he’d missed out on a chance to use his wizard’s Power.

Tears welled up in his eyes, but even as he turned away from Abron Mysti, he knew it wasn’t over yet. Not until he was dead would it be over. He’d spent years of his life becoming a wizard . . . and somehow, somewhere, he would find a way to use his hard-won Power to serve.

And when he did, he would gladly pay the price the Wizard's Curse demanded of him . . . because no matter what horror that price turned out to be, he would go to face it having finally achieved his life's goal.

And neither sickness nor frailty nor even death itself would ever be able to take that away from him. •

THE LITERARY CAREER OF TIMOTHY ZAHN

Current Directions . . .

Fantasy, even more than science fiction, is often accused of being escapist — and for what is, at first blush, apparently good reason. The average fantasy story is populated by wizards and dragons and unicorns, all of which the average person is rather unlikely to encounter in his or her daily life. So, this average person reasons, since fantasy obviously doesn't have any relevance to the "real" world, its readers must be in it for the excitement and adventure and the chance to leave the "real" world for a few hours. In a word, escapism.

These people miss the point. Fantasy — *good* fantasy, anyway — is very much concerned with the real world. It simply disguises that involvement, wrapping the problems and forces of our daily lives in allegory and symbolism. In many cases the reader is unaware, at least on a conscious level, of what the writer was actually trying to say. And in some cases, the writer is in the same boat.

Such was the case with "Clean Slate." The idea came to me a couple of years ago while sitting in on one of Orson Scott Card's excellent "1001 Ideas in an Hour" audience-participation panels, and at the time I thought it was simply a nifty curse to saddle a wizard with. It wasn't until long after I'd finished the story that it suddenly occurred to me that the Wizard's Curse wasn't really fantasy at all.

Think about it. Those off-handed jokes you made in high school at the class nerd's expense — does the memory of that shame and humiliation still haunt him? Conversely, that painfully shy person you befriended once at a convention, drawing her into your circle of friends for a two-day friendship you can barely remember — did that brief affirmation of her worthiness give her the confidence to reach out to others, perhaps putting her on the track to her current career?

Every one of us has done both. We've helped some, we've hurt others . . . and like Saladar, in many cases we'll never know the full extent of what we've done.

Escapists? Hardly.

Scary? Yes.

The Blackcollar. DAW Books, 1983.

A Coming of Age. Bluejay Books, 1985; paperback edition: Baen Books, 1986.

Cobra. Baen Books, 1985.

Spinneret. Bluejay Books, 1985; paperback edition: Baen Books, 1986.

Cobra Strike. Baen Books, 1986.

Cascade Point and Other Stories, short-story collection. Bluejay Books, 1986; paperback edition: Baen Books, 1987.

Blackcollar: The Backlash Mission. DAW Books, 1986.

Triplet. Baen Books, 1987.

Cobra Bargain. Baen Books, 1988.

WINTER — THE ASTROGARE

Methane snow sticks to irregularities
on tinetrees & polyhedral domes
their skeletons barely visible
like these creatures in anticlined robes
of creased crusted grey flesh
the Astrogare shrug off bundles
bones of the creosote beast found
poking like stele through the drifts
& dragged to the hearth fires
we make contact but they ignore us
this race knows so very little of man
of the equality of worlds
even the snows do not stay
long on their lined faces

— Robert Frazier

Inflections

The Readers

Dear Pat:

People rank the "Big Four" science-fiction digest magazines by different lights, but I think it would be hard to compete with *Amazing Stories* in the attractiveness category — the art is thoroughly pro, inside and out.

The cover of your July '88 issue may be slightly enhanced by having my name on the cover, or could I be biased? Anyway, while hurrying through the pages to check out my own story, I stumbled over "The Boring Beast," and broke out in hives of delight.

There ought be a funniness award, because people don't vote for Nebulas and Hugos for this kind of thing, and it deserves recognition.

Nevertheless, in time I reached "The Spokesthing." Perhaps a few other readers will too. Before they write in to chide me for misspelling *pragmatism*, the title of Charles Pierce's philosophical school, let me assure them that I did indeed use that ugly word, but it got corrected to the more sonorous *pragmatism*. In this instance the defenders of the English language won a small triumph.

Yours,

Phil Jennings
32130 County Road One
St. Cloud MN 56303

Thanks, Phil, for your nice comments about the July 1988 issue. And we agree with your statement about humorous stories. For some reason, they're rarely given the same consideration for awards as

serious SF/fantasy, as if the creative expression of the author isn't as valid or noteworthy when he or she writes humor. Personally, we believe that SF/fantasy writers often take themselves too seriously, hoping to gain acceptance from the mainstream literary community. SF/fantasy writers really do need to lighten up.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Greetings:

If it is necessary for Mr. Turtledove and Mr. Sandes to have some liquid refreshment before they write the type of excellent story as they did in your July 1988 issue, "The Boring Beast," get them a six-pack!

I have not enjoyed such a play on words as "it must have come from a sleepy peach" since my wife brought "A Spell for Chameleon" by Mr. Piers Anthony (where shoe trees grew shoes) to my attention.

Sincerely,

C. Henry Depew
3312 Lake Shore Drive, West
Tallahassee FL 32312

But will a six-pack be adequate?

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Pat,

I received the new *Amazing Stories* a few days ago and feel I should compliment the Janet Aulisio cover and interiors. The more I see of her work, the more impressed I am. I wish I could examine the original of her cover piece to see what medium she used, how it was applied, how large, etc. It's

beautiful.

The letter from Robin F. Rowland in "Inflections" prompted me to look up the previous letter from Sioux Falls, and then to read the story it referred to ["Kid Charlemagne" by Paul Di Filippo, September 1987].

It's an excellent story. What amazes me is: in a tale which dealt with bigotry, racism, miscegenation, and drug addiction — to say nothing of murder — what caused that reader in Sioux Falls to pick out the very minor and obliquely mentioned bit of homosexuality to be offended by? That's being incredibly selective in one's prejudices. If that reader ever attends a convention, I suspect he/she may never read science fiction again. The number of gay fans, writers, artists, and editors is, I suspect, somewhat larger a percentage than in the general population. If SF is escapist literature, it makes sense that it would appeal to those who have most in this society to escape from.

Best,
George Barr
904 Toyon Avenue
San Jose CA 95127

It's a tragedy, George, that some people seem unable to relate to or have compassion for their fellows. And unfortunately, there are those who aren't selective at all when it comes to proclaiming their prejudices, as witnessed in the following letter.

— *Patrick Lucien Price*

Dear *Amazing Stories*:

After reading two copy[s] of *Amazing Stories*, here is [sic] my thoughts on your rag mag:

Take your bitch-worshipping magazine and shove it you know where.

I'm a science-fiction nut, a real fan. I'm also a man, but your last couple issues were all just about women. I

find your mag so uninteresting and so boring I can only say, "Cansell [sic] my subscription." Don't bother to sent [sic] back the money from the sub; just don't send anymore of this [feminist] crap to my house.

Jaman Mann
P.O. Box 1184
Sun Valley CA 91352

P.S. The name is *Mann*, not *Woman*.

From Webster's Third New International Dictionary:

nut n. slang. 8 b (1): one whose thinking or conduct is eccentric. (2): one who is or seems to be mentally unbalanced.

Readers, feel free to respond to this individual.

— *Patrick Lucien Price*

Dear Mr. Price,

If the human race ever runs into any aliens, we are probably going to want to communicate with them. Thus I read with interest Sheila Finch's recent article, "Berlitz in Outer Space." Finch, however, seems to have overlooked that since 1957 Noam Chomsky's ideas about the biological basis of language have transformed the way we view language. Chomsky's essential idea is that humans are genetically predisposed to acquire only certain kinds of systems as human languages. Finch mentions Chomsky's ideas but fails to explain its relevance to alien communication, i.e., that alien languages are probably unlearnable to the human language faculty. Most importantly, though, no serious study of language can afford to just pass over this central issue.

The problem with Finch's essay is that she doesn't focus on the structure of language, instead she mixes together language, thought, and culture. Finch

spends much of her discussion on ideas like Whorf's linguistic relativity that are now considered passé among linguists. She does state as Chomsky's view that "human brains are hard-wired for some basics in language." Her examples that follow, however, have more to do with the *use* of language rather than with the structure of language or our mental faculties.

Chomsky, though, has a clear, well-published position on the nature of language. 1) Human language is based on a specific mental structure, a kind of language *organ*. 2) Like any body organ, the language organ is genetically preprogrammed to grow and mature given the proper environment (i.e., upon exposure to a human language). 3) Our genetic programming places narrow limits on the types of systems (grammars) learnable as human languages.

So, with the above in mind, let's take another look at the problem of learning an alien language. Now we know that humans are genetically limited as to what kinds of grammars they can learn. So could we learn an alien language (even if exposed as babies)? Chomsky himself states, "Not if their language violated the [genetically dictated] principles of our . . . grammar, which, given the myriad ways that language can be organized, strikes me as highly likely." In other words, language could be efficiently organized in many different ways. So it seems that only by the sheerest coincidence would an alien's language be similar enough to ours to be learnable. (Note: See Chomsky, Noam. Interview. *Omni*, November 1983, pp. 113-118, 171-174.)

Well, to make a long story short, it's still a good idea to study alien communication, and this is by no means a definitive essay on the subject. And I

applaud and encourage the publication to print this kind of science fact/speculation. Yet any reasonable article on language can hardly afford to brush over the ideas of Chomsky, today's foremost linguist, especially when Chomsky's views seem to lead to different conclusions. Thanks for your time and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

K. Scott Ferguson
8322 Ned Ave., Apt. B
Baton Rouge LA 70820

We thank you, Scott, for your letter. We did, however, send a copy to Sheila Finch so that we could get her comments about the issues raised.

— *Patrick Lucien Price*

Dear Patrick:

It's gratifying that Mr. Ferguson takes such a speculative issue as alien communication seriously! I have the utmost respect for Chomsky's opinions. But then, that's what I said: it's going to be hellishly difficult, if not downright impossible, to communicate with aliens — exactly because the hard-wiring in our brains predisposes us to learn *human* languages, not necessarily alien ones. As for Whorf's ideas being passé — I wouldn't count on it, especially with reference to alien languages. Being out of fashion doesn't always mean being *wrong*.

Best wishes,

Sheila Finch
127 Prospect Avenue
Long Beach CA 90803

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you read this magazine for personal enjoyment.

Till next issue.

— *Patrick Lucien Price*



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